

WELCOME TO
THE 2022
**LOWITJA
O'DONOGHUE**
ORATION

Guest Orator:
The Hon Linda Burney MP
The Way Forward – Informed by the past



DON DUNSTAN FOUNDATION
inspiring action for a fairer world



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE



BHP



Reconciliation
South Australia



Government of South Australia

The Way Forward – Informed by the Past

Hon Linda Burney MP
Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians
(conferred on 1 June 2022)

Held at Bonython Hall, The University of Adelaide
31 May 2022

Ballumb Ambul Kurna yindamarra. Ngadu – yirra bang marang.

I have just said in Wiradjuri, the language of my people:

I pay my respects to the ancient Kurna people – and honour their custodianship and care for country.

I also pay my respects to the many senior people here tonight from across the Australian community. Thank you all, for being here.

Thank you to the opening remarks from Steve – whom I have known you for a very, very long time ... such a long time. And can I particularly thank Taylor and Ashum for their words. I am sure that those vibrations reached exactly where they were supposed to reach. I echo your acknowledgements of so many colleagues here tonight, Steve, and I won't go through that list all again.

But I do want to make a very special mention of Lowitja's nieces Deb Edwards and Amy O'Donoghue. I am deeply, deeply moved. And their daughters Bianca and Ruby, whom I met earlier. Thank you for making me feel so welcome.

I wanted to also acknowledge Stuart Rintoul (is Stuart here?), who has been the author of Lowitja's fantastic biography. Absolutely brilliant, so thank you.

Can I acknowledge Her Excellency Frances Adamson, Governor of South Australia ... and much loved, I can tell. And to Lynn, thank you so much for your words earlier, and your patronage of the Don Dunstan Foundation. I also want to mention Tanya Hosch, who is a very special friend, as well.

I'd like to reflect, as I have done many times before, on the significance of acknowledging country. This is so important. By observing this protocol, we are reminded, everyone, of three things:

With the oldest being the nation states of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Including of course the Kurna, the Pitjantjatjara – Lowitja's mother's people – the Barngarla, the Arabana, the Ngarrindjeri, the Kokatha. Of course, the 'bighty' Wiradjuri or the fighting Wiradjuri, as we are known, and the Eora people who were the first people to experience the brunt of colonisation.

This is a map which – I am pleased to say – is gradually becoming clearer in the Australian consciousness.

In large part this is because of acknowledgements at school assemblies, sporting fixtures, on planes – and in parliaments.

On television and radio – both commercial and public – it is now a common occurrence for traditional country to be acknowledged in live crosses, or at the start of bulletins.

You can even address a letter to Kurna country. That’s if you still send letters, of course.

Secondly, acknowledging country reminds us of the great gift Aboriginal culture and survival gives Australia.

Thirdly and most urgently, acknowledging country reminds us of unfinished business. Of the poor outcomes that still plague first Australians. And of the recognition that is still wanting.

I am deeply grateful, and somewhat awed, by the invitation from the Don Dunstan Foundation – to give the 2022 Lowitja O’Donoghue Oration.

I truly hope I can live up to the great gift I have been handed today. And I know that I am going to cry.

I also thank Flinders University, the University of Adelaide, and Reconciliation South Australia –

As well as Steve said, the corporate partners BHP, SA Power Networks and the Government of South Australia for your support of the Foundation – the work of which is a leading light for social justice, fairness and progressive change.

Living up to the contribution of the people who have given this oration in the past is kind of daunting – people like Pat Anderson, the Hon Michael Kirby, Marcia Langton, the Hon Patrick Dodson, and the Hon Paul Keating – just to name a few.

You might all have noticed some recent changes in the political landscape of Australia. (audience applause). And I can’t stop smiling. But I am not talking about what you think I am.

I came here today from a Labor Caucus meeting in Canberra where there were no less than six First Nations members. Malarndirri McCarthy and Marion Scrymgour from Northern Territory, Patrick Dodson from Western Australia, Jana Stewart from Victoria as well as Dr Gordon Reid (and he is a medical doctor, and handsome) and me, from New South Wales.

This election has been a doubling of First Nations people in the Labor caucus. There are as many Wiradjuri people in the Labor caucus as Liberals from Adelaide and Perth combined. Lowitja would be thrilled.

I'd also like to acknowledge my friend Kyam Maher and Peter Buckskin, whom I think is here tonight. Peter if you're here, Anne Martin says hi and sends her love.

It is no small thing, Kyam, for a First Nations Attorney General of South Australia. It is a great achievement for Kyam personally, but also, an indication that, as a country, everyone, that we are making progress on our reconciliation journey.

And I do believe that reconciliation is a journey, not a destination.

I am hopeful that it won't be too far into the future when our progress on reconciliation would make this unremarkable. That we can be the shoulders on which many can stand.

I know that I will be sworn in tomorrow as the first, First Nations woman in the Federal cabinet because of the shoulders that were there for me to stand on – shoulders like Lowitja's. It is not lost on me.

Stuart Rintoul's biography of Lowitja reflects on the exclusion of First Nations people at the birth of our nation in 1901. On the fact that our Constitution only mentioned Aboriginal people by exclusion. Exclusion from the laws of the Commonwealth, and exclusion from even being counted.

Stuart went on to describe the early of days of Federation like this:

In the new parliament, Alfred Deakin, one of the most prominent fathers of Federation, speaks of them as a vanishing race:

'Little more than a hundred years ago Australia was a Dark Continent in every sense of the term, he said.

There was not a white man within its borders. In another century, the probability is that Australia will be a white continent with not a black, or even a dark skin among its inhabitants.

The aboriginal race has died out in the south and is dying fast in the north and west even where most gently treated. Other races are to be excluded by legislation, but if they are tinted to any degree.'

Speaking in favour of immigration restriction, Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmond Barton – 'Australia's noblest son', as he will be remembered at the time of his death – says he does not believe *'that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality'*.

Well, I've got news for Mr Deakin and Mr Barton. We have survived. And, now, I am the Member for Barton. So, take that!!

Lowitja was not just a giant for those of us who knew her, but a giant for our country. She shouldered the burden of callousness, cruel ignorance and wrong policies of the Stolen Generations.

Lowitja said, of the impact on her:

'For much of my childhood I was deeply unhappy. I felt I had been deprived of love and the ability to love in return. Like Lily, my mother, I felt totally powerless.

And I think this is where the seeds of my commitment to human rights and social justice were sown.'

And through her commitment, Lowitja led the way for a generation of Aboriginal leaders and activists.

I will never forget the 1997 Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, who was refusing to apologise to the Stolen Generations, came to make a speech. Well, he really just shouted at us. With him was John Herron, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, who didn't even accept there was ever a Stolen Generation.

As Howard spoke, a wave went through the Convention Centre – a wave made by people standing and turning their back. And it was one, Lowitja O'Donoghue, who led the way.

It was an ugly period for Australian politics, especially for First Nations people.

In 1998 Howard gave us his 10-point plan: to gut the thoughtful Native Title Bill the Keating Government had introduced, in response to the Mabo decision. A bill negotiated with Lowitja and my late husband Rick Farley, among others.

This was when Deputy Prime Minister, Tim Fischer, spoke proudly of his Government's plan for *'bucket loads of extinguishment'*. And many of you will remember that.

And from Borbidge in Queensland to Kennett in Victoria, the country was warned that backyards were under threat: that the Hills Hoist was going to go. And here in South Australia there was a hoax letter warning that Aboriginals would have unrestricted access to all of your backyards.

Disinformation campaigns are nothing new. This time was corrosive, divisive and diminished us as a nation. And against this backdrop, we saw the rise of One Nation, fuelled by rhetoric about Aboriginal *'privilege'*.

We also had a government of Australia working hard on the sterilisation of our history. Remember those inane debates about black and white arm bands? All we were seeking was truth. And at this time, we had the greatest exercise of truth telling our nation has been through.

The week of the Reconciliation Convention was the week the *Bringing Them Home* report was released. Everyone ... it was a line in the sand. After that moment, no-one could ever say again: *'we didn't know'*.

The truth was painful and brave, and Australia has not been able to look away since.

We are a different country for hearing the truth. Lowitja's own story demonstrates how the Stolen Generations served to not only break families, but also take away cultures.

Lowitja was in her 30s and working for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Coober Pedy, when an aunt and uncle recognised her family resemblance in a supermarket. A chance encounter that finally led to Lowitja meeting her mother, Lily in Oodnadatta.

A meeting Lowitja described like this ... and this really goes to your heart. This is Lowitja talking about her Mother:

'Apparently, when she heard that I was going to visit her, she waited in the dust by the side of the road for days, in anticipation.'

And then of course, when I arrived, she discovered that we did not share a common language to communicate with. We could not speak with each other – except through our eyes.'

Personally, everyone, I understand this. I met my Father and found out I had ten brothers and sisters when I was 28.

You could not know Lowitja, and not forever be changed.

For me, as a younger woman, seeing Lowitja being even-handed and strong as the Chairperson at ATSIC: a body of elected First Nations people representing us, was an astounding and affecting moment, and made a significant impact on my life. And to think she had Pat Turner as CEO. Two strong, First Nations women empowered to make a difference for our people. Empowered by knowing they had us behind them. They gave us a voice, a real voice.

They showed us what representation means. How powerful it can be. What can be done when it's real.

They showed how to be graceful and decisive at the same time. How to take no rubbish, diplomatically. These are ways of working I have always tried to bring to bear in my own life.

I was born in 1957 – yes, 65 years old. My birth was a scandal because my mother was white, and further still, unmarried. Try that in a small country town.

I will never know the full story, but I do know I was raised by my great aunt and great uncle: a white brother and sister, neither of whom were married: Letitia and Billy Lang. Good Scottish stock, who lived through two World wars, the Spanish flu and the Depression, and it showed.

It took real courage for them to see past the values of their time and take me on. They were people born not last century, but the century before. Their courage saved me from institutional care, and they instilled in me the qualities I saw in Lowitja, especially a responsibility to others, and a work ethic to match that responsibility.

I got to know Lowitja well when I was appointed to the National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1997. When Minister Robert Tickner appointed me to that body, it was a bit like being picked for Australia out of school team.

The Council was full of remarkable men and women I had looked up to my whole career, and I was the youngest member by a long way.

Everyone respected Lowitja and listened to her wisdom. It would be hard not to. She had twinkling eyes and a breathtakingly deep understanding of Australia and its humanity.

Being in her presence always felt like being in a kindly, but stern school principal's office: you were desperate not to disappoint, and never quite knew what would happen if you did.

I was fully grown professional woman, but I suspect Lowitja would have had no problem giving me a proper grounding if I ever deserved it, all the same.

I've been given a great number of honours in my public life, but for me being invited to provide an oration is one of the greatest.

I've been fortunate to do a number:

- Vincent Lingiari
- William Cooper
- Charles Perkins
- Frank Archibald
- Nugget Coombes
- And today: Lowitja O'Donoghue.

They are giants, one and all, and I feel tiny in their presence.

The topic I have chosen for tonight is: *The Way Forward – Informed By The Past*

I had to choose this topic before the Federal election, knowing I could be giving it in two very different circumstances, and thus two very different speeches:

- 1) from Opposition, where I would be standing here urging everyone not to give up, to push, to advocate and go forward; or
- 2) from Government, where I could stand in front of you and say: *'here is our agenda: the one the Australian people have voted for'*.

And I will let you in on a secret. I accepted the invitation to give this oration very much hoping I could give you the second speech.

One of the things we took to the people just over a week ago was the firm commitment to implement the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* in full.

The Statement says:

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.

This is what the Government I'm a part of, is going to do. It is what the election outcome means. It is the invitation the people of Australia have accepted.

When you think about the legacies that spring to mind for Labor Prime Ministers and Governments you realise how central progress on bringing First Nations people voices and interests into the heart of government decision-making has been for Labor.

Gough Whitlam handing back the soil of Gurindji land to Vincent Lingiari.

Paul Keating acknowledging the truth of our history in the Redfern Speech.

Kevin Rudd apologising to the Stolen Generations.

And Anthony Albanese and I want to add the next big thing to this list: implementing the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, in full.

In launching our commitment to First Nations people during the campaign, the Prime Minister said (... I love saying that ...), the Prime Minister said:

'An Albanese Labor Government is determined to walk with First Nations people on this path.

If elected, we will move quickly on a referendum to enshrine a Voice to the Parliament in our Constitution.

And we will establish a Makarrata Commission to progress Treaty and Truth-Telling.'

Five years ago, after twelve regional dialogues, 212 First Nations people came together at Uluru. It was a deliberate decision to go to the spiritual heart of our Nation. Out of those dialogues and that Convention came that generous invitation for First Nations people, and all of Australia to walk together.

The Dialogues, the Convention and the Statement itself are the things that informed and inspired our approach as a party and will guide us in government.

I was there in the Cabinet Room when the Statement was presented to the Prime Minister, then Malcolm Turnbull, and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten. It asked those in the room, and everyone around this country, for three things:

- A constitutionally enshrined Voice to the Parliament – advisory only, and
- A Makarrata Commission with the responsibility for a national process of Truth telling, and
- Treaty agreement making.

It didn't say how to do or structure any of these things. In many ways, this openness is confounding.

The *Uluru Statement from the Heart's* plea is thus:

'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.'

I have to appreciate its simplicity, and its brilliance. The language is beautiful, and the invitation to work together is generous.

The gentleness of the language, of the approach, is key to understanding what the Statement asks for.

A Constitutionally enshrined Voice requires a referendum. Now, as you all know, that's a very high bar in Australia: the majority of people and the majority of States.

Every one of the 44 referendums put to the Australian people, only eight have passed. The last to pass was in 1977.

I remember that day in that Cabinet Room when Malcolm Turnbull dismissing the notion of a referendum on a Voice out of hand. I strongly felt at the time it was heavily influenced by Malcolm's experience with the 1999 referendum on the Republic.

While profoundly disappointing that the Prime Minister of the day did not have confidence in the Australian people, it was at least a better reason than Scott Morrison's retort during the recent campaign: *'Why would I?'*

I said a moment ago that the last referendum to pass was 1977. Can anyone tell me what it was about? It was actually a triple-header.

So, you've got triple the chances to score kudos with your peers here if you can stick your hand up and tell me ... don't do that because it will take too much time. The three questions were around ... remember:

- filling casual Senate vacancies;
- retirement age of judges ... that's what I remember; and
- the conduct of referendums.

The referendum that everyone actually remembers, is 1967.

You get a lot less kudos from everyone here for remembering what that one was about. How old were you when the referendum was held? Did you vote in it? I know there are people in this audience who weren't even born.

I was 10 years old when my country, when my fellow citizens decided to count me in the population of the country I was born in, on the land my ancestors had lived on for countless generations.

1967 was the most supported referendum Australia has ever had.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine: 90 per cent of Australians agreeing on something? Can you imagine, or remember, how it felt to walk down the street that week, looking your fellow citizens in the eye, knowing that together you had expressed your values and made your country a fairer place?

Now imagine this, everyone. Imagine this. Imagine how this next referendum will make us all feel: about ourselves, our neighbours, and our country, when it passes. Walk with me.

Walk with me in that future for a moment. Imagine how defining it will be for your life, for your country, for the lives of First Nations people. For our children and their children after. And our Elders whose shoulders we've leant on.

Tony Abbott once said, of recognising First Nations in the constitution: *'I am prepared to sweat blood on this.'*

I didn't understand why Tony Abbott said many of the things he said, but I understand that feeling entirely. I know I am not alone in feeling that, too.

Lowitja was the first person to head our last Voice: ATSIC.

It was created by legislation, and then removed in the same way.

The existence of a First Nations Voice to Parliament should not be subject to the whims of the government of the day. The Voice must be about giving First Nations people self-determination.

The same self-determination must form the basis of what we do as a government. And as the Minister, tomorrow that is, tomorrow, that is what will guide me. Because I am convinced that if our nation had a Voice to Parliament from the start, we would not have seen a Stolen Generation.

Children like me and like other First Nations people here today would have been able to learn and continue our language and culture at school, rather than hide out of shame. And the intervention would not have happened.

A commitment to self-determination has shaped the agenda Labor took to the election. Of course, implementing the Uluru Statement, but also turning the tide on incarceration through justice re-investment.

Reinvesting in housing and services in the Northern Territory homelands – places of great cultural significance, which had been cut off from support to make a political point.

Scrapping the punitive and ineffective Community Development Programs and replacing it with real jobs, real wages, proper conditions, and more community control. Picking up where the old CDEP left off. Making income management voluntary for individuals or communities.

Doubling Indigenous rangers and delivering cultural water to the Murray-Darling basin. As well as working ambitiously with business, and in the public sector to lift First Nations employment.

And making First Nations Australia part of the way we engage with the world through the appointment of our first Aboriginal Ambassador in Australia.

As well as continuing to work with the Coalition of Peaks on Closing the Gap and lifting, and lifting, the ambitions of our people.

On the day after the election, Ken Wyatt sent me a lovely message of support. And I would like to mark his contribution tonight.

I have known Ken for 40 years, and I count him as a friend. He is pragmatic, thoughtful and has a deep understating of geographic and cultural differences across Australia. In the last Parliament, I was able to work with Ken to support important changes like striking a deal with Harold Thomas to free the Aboriginal flag from commercial interests. I love that.

Establishing a Commonwealth redress scheme for survivors of the Stolen Generations – something many of us have been long-term advocates of. And committing to the Ngurra Cultural Precinct in Canberra.

To be a First Nations person in the Indigenous Affairs portfolio is an incredible privilege as I am sure Ken well knows. But the burden of expectation is also great. I am very pleased to be continuing where Ken left off.

In progressing a Constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament, I will be carefully considering the work of the co-design group set up by Ken. But that work only goes so far, because the co-design process was prevented ... prevented from considering constitutional change.

In recent days I am very pleased that Ken has said he would support a Constitutionally enshrined Voice. And he is in good company. The AFL, the NRL and even the Pope have all given their blessing to the *Uluru Statement and an enshrined Voice*.

And on this front, I say to Ken, I need your support brother.

There is no one for whom supporting a referendum for a Voice to Parliament represents a bigger political opportunity than Peter Dutton. After a decade of divisive political discourse – of lifters and leaners, of those who have a go, and by inference, those who don't, this is an opportunity for unity and for leadership. And an opportunity for Peter Dutton to show his much-talked-about different side.

It is also about being on the right side of history. And Peter Dutton has on recent days reflected on what it is like to be on the wrong side of history after walking out on the apology to the Stolen Generations.

But you know what, we all grow, and we all change. And there is no shame in that at all. In fact, that is what the journey of reconciliation is all about. And it is a path I would be very pleased to walk with Peter Dutton and the Liberal Party.

The Nationals and the Greens Political Party also have important decisions to make about putting the national interest ahead of narrow political ambition. Because I know Australia is ready for this. I know you are all ready for this.

And if we are all flexible, and we all accept some level of compromise, together, this Parliament could unite to inspire our country to something really great.

To demonstrate a kind of genuine leadership across divides, which too many Australians are questioning whether we are capable of anymore.

I started by talking about heroes of the past: William Cooper, Frank Archibald, Charles Perkins, Faith Bandler, Vincent Lingiari, Nugget Coombs, Pearl Gibbs – and Lowitja O’Donoghue.

And then there are non-Indigenous people who have stood alongside our First Nations people to be advocates for justice and drivers of change. You are here tonight, many of you. People like Paul Keating, Gough Whitlam, Jessie Street, Kevin Rudd, Don Dunstan are all giants to us.

None of these giants got there alone. They got there together with their community, with their country.

Anthony Albanese wants us to do the work of giants and build the next big piece of our national story together.

I am calling on each and every one of you here in this room tonight to do your part.

Lowitja O’Donoghue was a giant. An amazing, graceful, tough giant.

I am so grateful and honoured to be able to give this oration tonight.

My life has led me to this place and given me the chance to gather the country together on this task of nation building.

Lowitja did not fail in her task of building the nation and giving First Nations people a Voice.

I need you to lend your effort to the cause of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* including an enshrined Voice to the Parliament.

I promise you that I will not fail you in this task and together, I know we will all succeed.

Thank you.