



MURAWIN

BREAKING CYCLES - BUILDING FUTURES

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MAKARRATA

CONVERSATIONAL WORKSHOP

Exploring the context behind Makarrata and need for a process of agreement-making between Australia's governments and First Nations people and truth-telling about our history.

WHAT'S THE GO WITH

TRUTH-TELLING?

A Central element to Makarrata is the need and call for 'truth-telling'. This refers to the need for First Nations history, and indeed the whole and truthful history of Australia, to be told. Why? Because we cannot move forward until everyone knows and understands where we have come from.

ORIGINS

OF THE TERM MAKARRATA

Makarrata is a Yolngu word which refers to the coming together after a struggle, facing the facts of a wrong and living again in peace. It is a complex, multi-layered philosophy, which has helped develop and maintain peace in north-east Arnhem Land.

Traditionally, the term refers literally to a spear penetrating, usually the thigh, of a person that has done wrong... so that they cannot hunt anymore; to settle them down, to calm them.

In today's political context, the starting point for Makarrata involves two disputing parties coming together. Each party, led by their Elders, then speak carefully and calmly about the dispute. They must put the facts on the table and air their grievances. Those who come for vengeance are not considered, as they might disrupt the process.

Once a full understanding of the dispute is attained, a settlement can then be agreed upon; it is also a symbolic reckoning.

The dispute is then over, and both parties can move on together in peace and harmony.

The term has long been suggested as an alternative name for the Treaty process in Australia, but has gained more recent recognition through its inclusion in the ***Uluru Statement from 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 alienated 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 for a better future.

HISTORY OF MAKARRATA

In 1979, the then Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Fraser, announced that his Government would enter into negotiations for a Treaty, and that they were only prepared to negotiate with the elected National Aboriginal Conference (NAC).

Following this, the NAC recommended a Treaty of Commitment be entered into between the Australian Government and Aboriginal nations. It was decided that the Indigenous word, Makarrata, should be used for the process. After the NAC sub-committee on Makarrata undertook community consultations across the country with Aboriginal people, they made a number of recommendations of what it believed was a “faithful expression of expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people”.

These recommendations included recognition of prior ownership, and negotiation of a Makarrata with the Australian government as an equal party. It also covered issues of education, compensation, the return of lands, as well as reserved Indigenous seats in government, Indigenous employment in government agencies, and the return of artefacts and human remains from museums.

So what happened? The NAC prepared 27 points for discussion. Ultimately, a major point that represented pre-negotiation concessions was a point that contributed to the demise of the Makarrata/Treaty process.

“Sovereignty” was viewed by some Aboriginal leaders as an unrealistic ambition; they argued that other matters such as Land Rights had greater need for representations. Because the Aboriginal opposition refused to talk to the Makarrata/Treaty body, they failed to realise that the NAC had been in the process of developing a Land Rights Regime for National discussion but this proposal never saw the light of day.

The opposition came primarily from the Federation of Aboriginal Land Councils and was known through individual and collective submissions to the appointed Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs National Enquiry into the Legal and Constitutional feasibility of entering into a Makarrata/Treaty between the National Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Lobbying and internal debate within the NAC between the pro-Makarrata people and the supporters of the newly formed National Federation of Aboriginal Land Councils took its toll; eventually the whole of the NAC succumbed. Without the new Labor Government support, the members of the Federation of Aboriginal Land Councils were accepted by the Labor Government then to be a truer representation of National Aboriginal issues.

THE 2017 GARMA STORY

As the first major meeting of the nation’s Indigenous leaders in the wake of the historic Uluru summit, Garma 2017 had a central theme around Makarrata.

Yothu Yindi Foundation chairman and Gamatj Elder, Dr. Galarrwuy Yunupingu, outlined the principles of Makarrata, these principles have guided the conversation around Constitutional recognition and related issues, and offer a framework for the next stage of that process.

At the 2017 Garma, Dr. Galarrwuy Yunupingu gifted the term Makarrata to the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull to instigate the process and requested that he lead the nation in a journey of truth-telling to right the wrong done to the First Nations people of Australia and steer our nation towards unity and healing.

The Uluru Statement articulates two clear reform objectives that can be put forward for further public consultation: a Makarrata Commission and truth-telling about our history.

In late 2017, the Government rejected the idea of an ‘Indigenous voice to Parliament’ – this was a central recommendation of the convention at Uluru and the Referendum Council’s report - because it was not “desirable or capable of winning acceptance in a referendum”.

The government said there were doubts about how the body would function, as well as whether such a “radical change to our constitution’s representative institutions” would have any realistic prospect of being supported by a majority of Australians at a referendum.

Government emphasised that the Referendum Council’s other recommendation, a “Makarrata” reconciliation commission to oversee treaty-making, was .still on the table’.