

**ABORIGINAL RIGHTS — MARITIME INDUSTRY**

*Statement*

**HON KYLE MCGINN (Mining and Pastoral)** [5.20 pm]: I rise today to share a recent experience I have had, which has strengthened my commitment to closing the gap for the traditional owners of this land. Throughout my time in the union, I was kept energised by my fellow members and the leadership on standing together with Aboriginal people and stamping out injustice, industrially and throughout the community. In my days as a seafarer based in Darwin, I met a very passionate wharfie. His name was Thomas Mayor. He had worked on the wharf since he was 17 years old and worked his way up. Eventually, Thomas became the Northern Territory organiser and that gave him a bigger voice in fighting for Indigenous rights. After many years of advocacy, he became the elected branch secretary for the Northern Territory. One campaign I recall as a highlight was the continued support from the Northern Territory branch of the Maritime Union of Australia for the Wave Hill walk-off—a dispute that a member of the Northern Territory MUA branch, Brian Manning, directly supported. I had the pleasure of meeting Brian before he passed away. He was a very strong advocate for Indigenous rights. He used to drive his old J-series Bedford down from Darwin to drop off much-needed supplies to the guys in the dispute.

Thomas Mayor always called out injustice against Indigenous people in the maritime industry in the north, where it was rare to see training and employment engaged on the waterfront for Indigenous people. I quote Thomas's own words, according to my notes, on what he learnt from the docks —

“It's on the docks and as a union official that I learnt the value of unity. But more than that, I learnt that unity must be worked on, I learnt that unity means little without structure and legitimate accountable leadership, compromise and discipline, toward collective goals.”

Thomas is now fully engaged with the Uluru Statement From the Heart. I was lucky enough to see Thomas last week during his journey around the country, seeking support for the Uluru Statement. Also with him was David Collard, whom I met for the first time, and I could see the same passion and drive in his eyes and from his informative talk on the statement. I got to hear from them a firsthand account of the dialogue that led to the Uluru Statement From the Heart. Getting to hear from two people who were at the meeting was inspiring and gave me a real sense of the passion and pain that went into the creation of the statement.

I cannot say this better than Thomas, so I will speak now from Thomas's perspective and what I learnt from that speech. This is what I heard on the day, according to my notes —

The dialogues were held over three days. Workshops were based on recommendations of the past that, as with many aspirations of our people, had never been adopted and implemented by Parliament. From my perspective, I saw the dialogues and the culmination of those dialogues at Uluru as a great opportunity to empower us to achieve changes. I asked the Elders in the room, “Has there ever been an opportunity like this—13 three-day regional dialogues, informed discussion, accurate records of meetings, with elected delegates from meetings coming together in a place like Uluru?” The answer was a strong no.

I thought, “Wow! This is an opportunity. This is a chance for my people to build power. If we reach a consensus, we will have something specific to campaign for nationally. At the dialogues and convention there was high tension and hot debate. Seven delegates walked on the second day of Uluru; I knew they would. That was their right. But around 250 remained and completed that day's discussions.

On the morning of the third day, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was read for the first time by Professor Megan Davis. She read the last words, “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.”

What happened next, Thomas will never forget. He continued —

The entire room stood as one, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was endorsed by standing acclamation.

There were no amendments. One reading, Endorsed with standing acclamation by around 250 First Nations People elected in 13 regions.

First Nations people need a political voice that is accountable to their First Nations people, a voice, not chosen by a Prime Minister or the media. A political voice that is unapologetic in its representation, not sensitive to the axe that a Government can wield over funding.

This Constitutional Recognition considers our past. It considers that symbolism alone only achieves so much. It considers what happened to ATSIC. It picks up on our obligation, our responsibility to the next generations to avoid detrimental repetition.

If we build it, it must last.

I will now read the Uluru Statement From the Heart. It states —

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 for a better future.

That is very powerful stuff. I again echo Thomas’s words, as he notes, according to my notes —

that the Uluru Statement from the Heart is written to you, the Australian People. We cannot let this Statement be another trophy on the walls of Parliament. A reminder of Indigenous aspiration again dashed on the jagged rocks of political expediency.

When the nation walks with us to enshrine our rightful place in the Nation, we will be on the path to closing the gap. The Uluru Statement is a once in a generation opportunity. If you want to help, speak out in public. Do it regularly. Condemn those in parliament who have rejected the reasonable, but powerful step toward Makarrata. Congratulate those in parliament who have committed to the Voice ... Join and support in any way you are able. Join the people’s movement for the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

A Peoples Movement is needed now. This must go beyond black and white. Beyond Left and Right.