

Press Club speech - 16 August 2023

Acknowledgement of Ngunnawal and Ngambri

Intro

Hello everyone. I am Lidia Thorpe. I am a Gunnai Gunditjmara and Djab Wurrung woman.

Today I want to take you on a journey. A journey that talks about my Country and my people. About the pain we are feeling and the fights we are fighting.

I will tell you about why the proposed Voice to Parliament is not a step in the right direction that we need to mature as a nation instead, and what that looks like.

I am a Senator representing the Blak Sovereign Movement. This is not a new movement, it is just that we have never had a platform nor an audience willing to listen before.

We speak truth to power, and our resistance started the day war came uninvited to our shores and killed 90% of our people in a series of violent massacres known as the Frontier Wars.

The War

Victoria alone recorded at least 50 Frontier War massacres.

My mob, Gunditjmarra and DjabWurrung - my grandmother's country - had 70 clans living in peace and harmony pre-colonisation.

Ultimately, 63 clans were wiped off the face of the earth from this war. That's 90% decimation.

70 Gunditjmarra clans down to 7 clans, how is this not a war?

On my grandfather's Gunnai country, it was a sport to shoot blacks and The Black War, or what is sometimes called the Tasmanian War, resulted in at least 1000 Aboriginal deaths, likely many more, and led to a near destruction of First Peoples in Lu-tru-weeta/ Tasmania. A near complete destruction - how is this not an attempted genocide? How is this not war?

The extreme cruelty of colonisation has had devastating effects on our culture, our sacred sites, on our lives and on the lives of our children. It tortures our minds, souls and bodies. *And we still carry this trauma that has been passed down through generations in our hearts and bodies.

The Frontier Wars have never ended. Same war, different weapons, the same domination of First Peoples for access to our land and our resources.

Our people are still being rounded up and locked into cages at the highest rates in the entire world.

Our children are still being snatched away and taken from Country.

Our people are still being dispossessed of our Country, forced into homelessness on our own lands while sacred sites continue to be blown up for profit.

This is the continued cultural genocide on our people. This is our inheritance, this is our struggle.

Our children were ripped from their mothers' arms and put into institutions and homes where they were subject to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. This continues today. 1 in 6 of our children are torn away from their families and we are seeing ever increasing rates of child-removals across the country.

23,000 children are in out-of-home care today.

But despite 250 years of attacks on our people and Country, we have survived. We have demonstrated the power of our culture to hold us together and continue to protect and care for Country that sustains us all.

My Country

I invite all Australians to come on a journey and look through the lens of First Peoples and how we connect to Country.

First peoples of these lands and waters connect to Country akin to our mother. We love, nurture and respect Country like we do our mother.

The water that runs through our country is like the blood that runs through the veins of our mother. Giving life.

If we continue to bring harm to our Country, we ultimately bring harm to ourselves.

We are the oldest continuous living culture on the planet. We have lived through two ice ages, countless fires, droughts and floods. We know how to care for Country, but we are not allowed to do so. Your laws, your metal bars, concrete and police stand in the way. Keeping us from our mother.

Just last week, I learnt that a sacred Djab Wurrung women's birthing tree had been vandalised and poisoned in a disgusting attack. I was completely devastated.

The only way I can try to make the rest of the country understand the depth of pain we feel when sacred sites have been attacked is likening it to the death of our mother.

Grief. Loss. Despair.

First Peoples don't just have inherent rights, we have an inherent responsibility to care for Country, as our ancestors did. A duty of care. Being Sovereign is a responsibility. We Respect our Country like our mother.

We have expressed our grief, our pain, our hurt to the world. We have been forced to share details about the intimacy of a birthing site out of desperation to protect our mother Country.

That is what the paternalistic colonial legal system forces us to do: we must relive our trauma in courtrooms and news headlines while the audience stands by and judges if we are worthy of care. This is not the way it has to be.

We set up the Djab Wurrung Heritage Protection Embassy and successfully maintained an embassy for two years. We welcomed everyone who wanted to learn and protect, right up until the embassy was violently torn apart by hundreds of police officers who had the green light from the government of the day and the hand picked advisory bodies.

How could a road that shaves 6 minutes to people travelling outweigh protecting a site of such high cultural significance?

The Djab Wurrung birthing trees are close to my heart, but just today we have heard of another example of Country being hurt, with a giant old growth tree being cut down.

These ancestor trees hold knowledge of Country.

This destruction is the reality lived by First Nations peoples fighting to protect Country across this land, and across the world.

Indigenous peoples across the world protect 90% of the planet's remaining biodiversity.

We are the ones fighting to keep the waterways clean, the air breathable, the land healthy, protecting them from the violence of colonial governments that continue to pillage, plunder and pollute.

Sovereignty and Colonisation

The Australian colony is an imperial occupation of the land of hundreds of sovereign Nations. It is a project that subdues, oppresses and exploits First Peoples and Sovereignty in order to extract wealth, just so a handful of people can profit.

The colonial project killed and dispossessed First Peoples to get this power and wealth, and it will do whatever it needs to hold onto it.

It relies on the oppression and denial of First Nations Sovereignty in order to exist.

When we talk about Sovereignty, we are talking about much more than just the romanticised spiritual notion talked about in the Uluru Statement.

We are talking about real political Sovereign power. That's why the government is scared to acknowledge it.

We are talking about our **sovereign** rights.

Rights to our homelands,

Our right to nurture our lands, waters, sea country and sky as we have for millenia.

Our right to veto anything that has a destructive impact on our mother; to have the final say over the logging and destruction of our forests and bushlands.

The right for us to protect Country, and to prevent extinction, ecosystem collapse and climate change.

We are talking about the right to ensure a future for all people of these lands by practising sustainability, *love and respect.

Our people have never ceded Sovereignty. We have never given up our right to manage our own lands and our own people. That is our constitution. This Sovereign right has existed for over 100,000 years and still remains.

Our Sovereignty is our right to self-governance and to be the architects of our own future. It is the right to make and enforce our own laws, the right to economic independence, and the right to self-determine our own destiny. Our Sovereignty is real.

The only thing we lacked is the power to enforce it without interference by the colonial government.

But that is different now. We are strong, united and our power is growing.

The fight has always been about our Sovereignty, and it continues today. This is why I am standing here as a member of the Blak Sovereign Movement.

We are the cultural descendants of this resistance and we continue to retain our unceded Sovereignty and continue to fight for our Sovereign rights. I am not standing here as merely myself, but as one of many, as part of this lineage of fighters.

We are the grassroots activists, organisers, campaigners, Elders, Professors, and Loremen and Women who have been leading our people's resistance since colonisation began.

And we will continue to resist the colony until our Sovereign peoples have freedom, and until we have regained rights over our own lands.

CONSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION AND THE VOICE

This country has been built on lies, and the referendum for the Voice to Parliament is a continuation of these lies. It promises to finally 'fix the Aboriginal problem'.

It is false hope because it is tricking people into genuinely believing that a powerless advisory body is going to protect our Country and sacred sites, save our lives, keep our babies at home.

The Voice is the window-dressing to constitutional recognition. We have rejected constitutional recognition before.

It is a 20-year old Howard-era policy created with the explicit purpose of undermining Sovereignty, self-determination and land rights for First Peoples.

The Blak Sovereign Movement has been consistent to the opposition of any form of constitutional recognition and this Voice to Parliament.

This is just another attempt by a colonial government to make clear that it has power over us and forces its rules upon us.

I have been hearing all over the place that people should vote yes in the referendum, because this is what First Peoples asked for.

But who are the First Nations representatives the government has been talking to?

When the government of the day strategically selects which voices they want to listen to, who they want on their advisory bodies, they're already in the process of manufacturing the consent they need to destroy Country and continue their colonial project.

And when you give a Voice to only a selected few, you also inherently silence others. Silencing every other Blakfulla in the country, silencing the diversity of our people, silencing the knowledge and wisdom of our people.

This proposal is an insult to our intelligence, a breaking of our cultural protocols and an insult to the tens of thousands of people that marched on Invasion Day this year calling for Treaty.

Do not expect us to be silently complicit in our own colonisation.

The Voice is the easy way to fake progress without actually having to change a thing. It is a destructive distraction, absolving the government of its continued crimes.

If you judge the proposed Voice by Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, all peoples have the right to self-determination. The same right is affirmed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, what we call the UNDRIP. That would mean deciding our own fate, not advising others to decide over us in whatever way they wish.

The Voice cannot give us what we need. It has no power to return land, deliver services, distribute resources, enact laws or even block racist laws. It cannot build a single house for our people.

In fact, there is no guarantee it will do anything for us. The voice is subordinate to the federal parliament, to the very system oppressing us since colonisation.

The voice proposal endorses the racist ideology that black people have to be governed by someone else. The Voice doesn't end domination but affirms it.

There are 3 positions on this proposed voice. The Yes, the conservative, racist No, and the Progressive No.

The so-called 'progressive No' is the position of the Blak Sovereign Movements and others. We get attacked by the yes campaign for siding with the racists, for standing in the way of 'progress'.

Yet we are actually doing the opposite. We have done what everyone should do and actually analysed the proposed Voice for the conservative proposal of a powerless advisory body that it is.

We are merely pointing out that there is no progress. That there is false hope. That we deserve better.

This is why we should call off the referendum. It has caused nothing but harm and division already. And for what?

There won't be change until this society changes. Until this society's thinking, values, attitudes and systems have been revolutionised in order to ensure real Self-determination. We cannot continue the legacy of the Australian colony.

Way forward

What we need is an end to the war on our people that started on the day the boats arrived. There are 5 elements to how we get there, just like there are 5 elements in nature.

The 5 elements of the way forward are:

1. Truth-telling,
2. Implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody,
3. Implementing recommendations of the Bringing them Home report,
4. Implementing UNDRIP, and
5. Treaty

TRUTH

The first step in acknowledging our rights is being truthful about the history of this country. No more shying away from the brutal past and ongoing colonial violence. Truth is a sign of maturity and the only way we can overcome this country's hurtful history and create something new.

A Truth and Justice Commission could be at the heart of these efforts, allowing individuals, organisations and institutions to come forward to tell the true story of this place. It's not pretty, and it is a hard task and one that's going to take time. But we can't do without it. We need peace. We cannot have peace without Truth.

Only through uncovering the history of this country, through 'rewriting it' in an honest way, can we write its future.

IMPLEMENT

The next three steps are about implementing advice that has been out there for decades - solutions we know are needed and will work.

When I first walked into the Senate Chamber, I carried a message stick of 441 deaths in custodies recorded since the reporting of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody alone. Now we are at over 500 deaths.

Governments could have prevented these deaths by implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission, yet 32 years later we are still waiting for action.

Similarly, we have now been waiting for 26 years for the recommendations of the Bringing them Home report to be implemented, to finally stop our children being removed from their families, communities, Country, language and culture.

Despite both child removals and deaths in custody continuing to rise, successive governments have continued to ignore the recommendations put forward in these reports. Recommendations that were based on expert findings and extensive consultation, and contained extensive evidence-based advice.

And yet all the Albanese Labor government has done in the past 18 months is implement a recommendation on real time reporting, which is basically a live count of the black bodies coming out of their prisons in body bags.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples clearly outlines the most basic rights of our people.

These are not individual rights but focus on self-determination, cultural rights and the rights of the collective. The declaration is not putting forward anything extraordinary but putting existing human rights principles into a First Nations context.

What that effectively means is that nothing about us should happen without us. We have a right to self determination.

We need governments to not just engage in tokenistic consultation. Consultation is not consent.

We ask for the principles of **Free, Prior and Informed Consent** to be adhered to. That means engaging with our people in a respectful way, recognising the wealth of knowledge, the care for Country, culture and community, and respecting our decisions.

Successful implementation of UNDRIP in other countries has proven that decisions made by the people for the people will have better outcomes not just for our people but for everyone. This will provide a greater chance to survive and thrive as a people - all of us.

Last year, I introduced a Private Senators Bill to parliament to enshrine the UNDRIP into Australian law. It is not asking the government to fix everything overnight, but to develop an action plan on how to effectively implement the UNDRIP in this country.

This would require an analysis of existing legislation on how it adheres to UNDRIP principles, outlining which legislation needs to be changed to stop the violations of our rights and prioritising this change.

We acknowledge that this is a process that requires time but we need to start it now.

In a Senate inquiry on the implementation of the UNDRIP in Australia we heard overwhelming support for enshrining the UNDRIP into domestic law as the number one means to our rights actually being respected.

Adhering to the UNDRIP would do vastly more for our people than any Voice ever could.

TREATY

Last but not least, I want to talk about Treaty. Treaty is an end to the war that was declared on us when the ships arrived. Treaty is a peace making instrument. Treaty is a way for two Sovereign parties to negotiate on a way forward and agree through an internationally recognised formal legal agreement.

Treaty provides us with the opportunity to negotiate on the things that matter to us.

This includes, but is not limited to, land and sea rights.

The courts recognised that terra nullius was a myth and that this land is ours. But instead of land rights we got Native Title, a token gesture that has caused many disputes in our communities, and that can be extinguished by the Government of the day with a flick of a pen.

People need to understand that Native Title is not land rights. Native Title is racist. Native title forces us to 'claim' our own land and justify our existence and connection to the coloniser. The coloniser then decides if it is legitimate. It is an insult beyond words.

We need to have a discussion about Land Back. One simple way to initiate Land back is a moratorium on the sale of Crown land everywhere. Once privatised, that land is locked away and is not coming back easily. This land doesn't belong to the Crown, it never has, and should be handed back to the First Peoples whose land it is.

Treaty provides us with an opportunity to put everything on the table, to reset the framework and heal.

Peace treaties must be front and centre, with every one of our nations to self-determine for themselves. We are not one homogenous group, as much as the colonial project would like us to be.

We know treaties can be broken, and they have been. But we have an opportunity in this country right now to have treaties of the 21st century, and we can learn from the lessons of all our brothers and sisters around the world.

Treaty is what we make it. It has to come from the people.

And the best part? You do not need a referendum, you just need a government who is willing.

Senate seats can be legislated, recommendations can be implemented.

Change can happen.

CONCLUSION

This is our chance to mature as a nation.

To have the hard conversations with each other and ourselves.

To confront the racism we have all been socially conditioned to accept, internalise and perpetuate.

To sit with the uncomfortable truth. See it. Grow from it.

Because right now, there is ongoing colonisation but no colonisers.
Racism but no racists.

When we begin to tell the truth, then we can heal together as a nation.
And from this healing, Treaty will bring peace.

So I invite all of you to walk with me. Embark on this journey.

Stand with our people. Stand up for what really matters.

Demand actual change, not tokenistic gestures.

We have a lot of work to do and we need to do it together. And we need to do it now.

If we do this through respect and understanding, we can create peace.
This is the start of all a revolution of change and justice. Join us.