

TRANSCRIPT

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Canberra

*Prime Minister, Minister for Indigenous Australians
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament
Referendum.*

E&OE

ANTHONY ALBANESE, PRIME MINISTER: My fellow Australians, at the outset I want to say that while tonight's result is not one that I had hoped for, I absolutely respect the decision of the Australian people and the democratic process that has delivered it.

When we reflect on everything happening in the world today, we can all give thanks that here in Australia we make the big decisions peacefully and as equals, with one vote, one value.

And I say to the millions of Australians all over our great country who voted Yes with hope and goodwill, the people who volunteered with such energy and enthusiasm, many of whom were taking part in their first-ever campaign, that just as the Uluru Statement from the Heart was an invitation extended with humility, grace and optimism for the future, tonight we must meet this result with the same grace and humility. And tomorrow, we must seek a new way forward with the same optimism.

My fellow Australians, the first time I spoke to you as Prime Minister of this nation, I repeated a commitment I had given many times before as Labor Leader. I promised that our Government would seek to implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart. I gave my word to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and elders who had poured their hopes and aspirations into that extraordinary statement. I spoke to the people from all walks of life and all sides of politics, the people of every faith and background and tradition, who had embraced this cause. I promised our Government would seek to answer the generous and gracious call of those 440 powerful words through a Voice, recognition, enshrined in the Constitution.

I never imagined or indeed said that it would be easy. Very few things in public life worth doing are. Nor could I guarantee the referendum would succeed. History told us that only eight out of 44 had done so. What I could promise was that we would go all in, that we would try. And we have.

We have given Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the fulfilment of their request that we take forward an idea that had been decades in the making, and we would give the Australian people the opportunity to decide for themselves. We have kept that promise. We have given our all. We argued for this change not out of

convenience but from conviction, because that's what people deserve from their Government. And of course, when you do the hard things, when you aim high, sometimes you fall short. And tonight, we acknowledge, understand and respect that we have.

As Prime Minister, I will always accept responsibility for the decisions I have taken. And I do so tonight. But I do want Australians to know that I will always be ambitious for our country, ambitious for us to be the very best version of ourselves. I will always be optimistic for what we can achieve together. In that spirit, just as I offered many times to co-operate with people from across the political spectrum on the next steps in the event of a Yes victory, I renew that offer of cooperation tonight. Because this moment of disagreement does not define us. And it will not divide us. We are not Yes voters or No voters. We are all Australians. And it is as Australians, together, that we must take our country beyond this debate without forgetting why we had it in the first place. Because too often in the life of our nation and in the political conversation, the disadvantage confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been relegated to the margins. This referendum and my Government has put it right at the centre. All of us have been asked to imagine what it would be like to walk in someone else's shoes. And we've been challenged to examine decades of failure from both sides of politics, despite all of the good intentions in the world. Indeed, those arguing against a change to the Constitution were not arguing for the status quo, because no-one could say that more of the same is good enough for Australia. Let us hold onto that truth, because a great nation like ours can and must do better for the First Australians. And while there has been talk in recent times about division, let us now co-operate to address the real division. The real division is one of disadvantage. The division that is the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, in educational opportunity, in rates of suicide and disease. The gap which separates Indigenous Australians from the right to make a good life for themselves.

I supported recognition through a Voice because this was the vehicle that Indigenous Australians believed could change this. This was the change they asked for at the First Nations Constitutional Convention at Uluru in 2017, after a process that involved hundreds of meetings and thousands of people.

And I want to make it clear. I believed it was the right thing to do. And I will always stand up for my beliefs. It's now up to all of us to come together and find a different way to the same reconciled destination. I am optimistic that we can. And indeed, that we must. There is a new national awareness of these questions. Let us channel that into a new sense of national purpose to find the answers. The proposition we advanced at this referendum was about listening to people in order to get better outcomes, and these principles are what will continue to guide me as Australia's 31st Prime Minister.

Our Government will continue to listen to people and to communities. Our Government will continue to seek better outcomes for Indigenous Australians and

their children and the generations to come. This is not only in the interests of Indigenous Australians. It is in the interest of all Australians to build a better future for our nation.

Tonight, I want to recognise that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this campaign has been a heavy weight to carry and this result will be very hard to bear. So many remarkable Indigenous Australians have put their heart and soul into this cause, not just over the past few weeks and months but through decades, indeed lifetimes, of advocacy. I have been honoured and humbled to stand by you and witness your extraordinary courage and grace, your great love for our country and your deep faith in our people, none less than my friend standing with me here today. You continue to inspire me and make me prouder than ever to be Australian. I have never been as proud to be Australian as when I sat in the red dirt at Uluru with those wonderful women. I have made lifetime friends. And for that, I am grateful.

Constitutional change may not have happened tonight, but change has happened in our great nation. Respect and recognition is given at events. The fullness of our history has begun to be told. Maintain your hope and know that you are loved.

My fellow Australians, our nation's road to reconciliation has often been hard going, climb steep, the ground uncertain, the headwinds powerful, the way forward difficult to navigate. But through the decades there have been hard moments, moments of hard-won progress as well. That's why I say tonight is not the end of the road and is certainly not the end of our efforts to bring people together. The issues we sought to address have not gone away, and neither have the people of goodwill and good heart who want to address them. And address them we will, with hope in our heart, with faith in each other, with kindness towards each other. Walking together in a spirit of unity and healing. Walking together for a better future for the first Australians, whose generosity of spirit and resilience intensifies the privilege that all Australians have of sharing this continent with the oldest continuous culture on earth. The historic fact that Australia's story is 65,000 years old remains a source of national pride and remains a fact.

From tomorrow, we will continue to write the next chapter in that great Australian Story. And we will write it together. And reconciliation must be a part of that chapter.

LINDA BURNEY, MINISTER FOR INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS: Thank you, Prime Minister. For many, today is a day of sadness. This result is not what we hoped for. The Australian people have had their say, and a clear majority have voted against the proposed change to the Constitution. We, of course, accept the decision of the Australian people.

Tonight, I am reminded of a special couple, Aunty Gloria and Uncle Clive. Their story tells us so much about our country. They are 90 and 93 years of age. Gloria is Aboriginal, Clive is non-Aboriginal. They married in 1953 at a time in our history

when their union was not accepted. They have seen a lot in life, the ups and downs, the best and the worst. They've experienced the joy of a shared life and raising a family, and they've experienced discrimination and the awful scourge of racism. But they always got through it with an open heart, with the strength of their family and community. Their lives show us how far we've come and how far we will still have to go in this country. There is a common bond, that we are stronger together. Gloria and Clive voted Yes in this referendum because they wanted to see a better future for their children and grandchildren. Gloria and Clive won't give up on a better future, and neither will we. I could not be more proud of people like Gloria and Clive, and the tens of thousands of Yes volunteers who worked so hard for recognition. You are truly, truly inspirational. The Yes23 campaign, the Uluru Dialogues, and, of course, the Prime Minister and my parliamentary colleagues. Thank you all so much. I will never forget that day in September when some 200,000 Australians walked together for Yes right across this country.

I know this outcome will be hard for some. But achieving progress is never easy. And progress doesn't always move in a straight line. There are breakthroughs and heartbreaks, but I am confident that because of this campaign and the millions of conversations it has sparked, that a new generation of Indigenous leaders will emerge. Young people like Sarah and Jakira, whom I met in Adelaide. They are stepping up and carrying the flame. That something good will come from shining a light on the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

And to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people I want to say this: I know the last few months have been tough, but be proud of who you are. Be proud of your identity. Be proud of the 65,000 years of history and culture that you are part of, and your rightful place in this country. We will carry on, and we will move forward, and we will thrive. This is not the end of reconciliation. And in the months ahead, I will have more to say about our Government's renewed commitment to Closing the Gap, because we all agree we need better outcomes for First Nations people. We need to keep listening to Indigenous Australians about what works and what can make practical differences for the next generation. Because we all want what's best for our children. We all want our children and grandchildren to have a better future.

JOURNALIST: Why do you think Australians voted No?

PRIME MINISTER: The analysis will go on for some time, no doubt. But the truth is that no referendum has succeeded in this country without bipartisan support. None.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, eight months ago you both stood on the stage and said you wanted to change the country. There will be a lot of Indigenous Australians who will be disappointed with the result. What can be done to improve outcomes in the short-term? And how will you ensure that reconciliation isn't in setback with some of the comments of the Yes campaign?

PRIME MINISTER: I will tell you that the first thing we will do is that we will continue to listen and we will engage with those Indigenous Australians, treating them with respect. Tonight will be a difficult night for many Indigenous Australians.

Overwhelmingly, if you look at the Indigenous dominated booths in places like Lockhart River, Palm Island, Mornington Island, Goodooga, the mobile polling booths aren't yet in from the Northern Territory, overwhelmingly they voted Yes in the referendum. Tonight isn't a night to say, 'Oh, well, we will move on, and here is the next agenda'. The agenda will be guided by the principles that I put forward consistently - engagement, consultation, listening, progress to close the gap.

JOURNALIST: In light of what you have just said, the first words out of your mouth as Prime Minister was a commitment to the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full. Is that still Labor's commitment?

PRIME MINISTER: We just had a referendum. We had a referendum and it wasn't successful. I respect the outcome of that referendum.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, you said, 'Because Australians are a fair, compassionate, and courageous people and that we are ready to take this step together'. Does tonight's result tell you otherwise, that we aren't a compassionate, fair, and courageous people?

PRIME MINISTER: I think Australians are fair and compassionate. I think during this campaign, we have had a clear proposition of just two things - recognition and a non-binding advisory committee. But we have had, including in outlets represented in this room, discussions about a whole range of things that were nothing to do with what was on the ballot paper tonight. You all know that that has occurred. Debates about the length of the Uluru Statement from the Heart that no-one serious, in this room - is there anyone in this room that thinks it was more that it was? But we had pages and pages and weeks and weeks in which those issues were portrayed. So, for many people it became an issue in which they were receiving a range of information. The Reserve Bank can rest easy now that they won't be getting advice on interest rates before the next meeting. That was some of the things that were discussed. There are a range of reasons.

But changing the Constitution is hard. I said, when I announced it. I stood here and said it's hard, there are no guarantees of success. We knew that was the case. But we also knew that Prime Minister John Howard promised to have a referendum on recognition, that Scott Morrison prior to 2019 promised to have a referendum on recognition. I was there in 2019 at the Garma Festival with Ken Wyatt, who I have total respect for, who stood there and gave, just as I did after the 2022 election, after 2019 there was a speech at Garma saying we would advance this. We promised to accept the graceful invitation of First Australians to put this to the Australian people. We did that. We campaigned for it. We did so with integrity and principle but we were not successful. And we respect that outcome.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, you came to office proposing other referenda, the Republic was something, not in this term, but you have certainly mooted you might look at it next term, you have a Minister for the Republic. What does this defeat do for your plans for another referendum is, given your observation that if you don't get bipartisan support you can't get a referendum up? Is this the end of referenda unless there is support from the Opposition for any other proposal?

PRIME MINISTER: I made it very clear that this was the only referendum that I was proposing in this term. I made no commitments about any further referendums. One of the things I did on election night - I spoke about this today, I spoke about it yesterday as well - I went through the range of commitments that I had made: cheaper child care, housing, national reconstruction and new industry, our climate policy. And this. We have gone through and fulfilled all of them. I am someone who believes that we need to restore faith in politics. And one of the ways that we do that is by saying what we will do and then doing what we have said we would do. That is what we have done tonight. And I make no apologies for that.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, referendums are about unity and deciding as a country what would the best route is moving forward. As Prime Minister, how do you reconcile the fact that your personal views and the views of most of your Party aren't aligned with the majority of Australians?

PRIME MINISTER: We accept the result. We accept the outcome. We had a referendum that we put forward. This arose from a request made in 2017 through the Uluru Statement from the Heart. I wasn't Prime Minister in 2017. But we had waited, Indigenous Australians had waited, for a long period of time for a government to have the conviction to put this to the Australian people. My predecessor was promised support from the Labor Party if the Morrison Government fulfilled that and took it forward to a referendum. They chose not to do so, as is their right. We chose to do so. During the campaign there isn't a single occasion in which all of the Indigenous people that I have spent time with, who it has been my honour to spend time with, not once at Garma, not once at Uluru, not once anywhere else did anyone else say, 'Hang on a tick here, can we kick this can down the road further?' There are people involved who stood on this stage with me in March who spent a lot of time on this, a lifetime struggling just to be recognised in our Constitution. I had a duty, as a conviction politician, to put that to the Australian people. I am reminded of one of my favourite Churchill quotes, and there are quite a few good ones. 'Success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts'. We intend, as a Government, to continue to do what we can to close the gap. To do what we can to advance reconciliation. To do what we can to listen to the First Australians.

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