

## The Indigenous People of Australia and their Struggle for Constitutional Rights

The [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) was issued to the Australian people in May 2017, developed after two years of deliberative “dialogues” around Australia. Broadly, it calls for constitutional change and meaningful, structural reforms based on justice and self-determination for the Indigenous peoples of Australia. The Uluru Statement calls for a First Nations voice to parliament enshrined in the constitution, and a Makarrata commission to supervise a process of agreement-making and truth-telling.<sup>1</sup> The Uluru Statement calls for a permanent forum of representation from which First Nations can advocate for their peoples to the parliament and government.

The statement says these reforms are necessarily sequential: a Voice first, then Treaty and Truth. This voice should be enshrined in the constitution, so it cannot be removed by any government some time in the future. To enshrine the voice, the constitution must be amended, and that can only be done by referendum. The architects of the Uluru statement say it was deliberately addressed to the Australian people, not any particular government, because it should be up to the people to decide on meaningful, permanent change.

In May 2017 The Convention endorsed the work of the Dialogues and issued the Uluru Statement from the Heart to the Australian people. The voice was immediately dismissed by the Liberal government of Malcolm Bligh Turnbull (2015-2018) as a “third chamber” of government, and he ruled out a referendum, dashing the hopes of all involved. From 2019, the former Indigenous affairs minister Ken Wyatt spent three years developing an alternative process of “Indigenous voice co-design”. The co-design group, all government appointees, met more than 70 times and developed a legislated model which was discussed – and criticized – but never tabled.

The Coalition refused to support a referendum. The first thing Australian Prime Minister from the Labor Party (since 2022) Anthony Albanese said in his victory speech after acknowledging the traditional owners of the land where he stood, was to promise that Labor will commit “in full” to the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#). He has vowed to hold a referendum about it during his first term, most likely in mid-2024. Albanese’s declaration, which marked a very clear departure from previous governments’ sentiment on Indigenous affairs, brought a big cheer from the room and reignited the hopes of the Uluru statement’s long-term campaigners and their supporters that there may now be progress on its demands.

However, the Liberal Party opposes any referendum. Peter Dutton and a handful of remaining senior MPs have made it clear they would actively campaign against one. Another challenge will come from the Greens, who now have a greater presence in federal parliament, and whose policy is for a treaty first. In fact, the Greens say the sequence of reforms should be the opposite: truth-telling, a treaty, and then a voice. They say a treaty, or treaties, between traditional owners and the colonisers have never been negotiated, and “sovereignty from First Nations people was never ceded”, so constitutional reform is not a priority.

### Sources:

A) <https://ulurustatement.org/>

B) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/may/22/voice-treaty-truth-what-does-labors-commitment-to-uluru-statement-from-the-heart-mean>

C) [https://www.sbs.com.au/language/arabic/ar/article/liberals-commit-judas-betrayal-in-opposing-voice/hiqw5mw9m?fbclid=IwAR2Niwi0nZyrnduzqV1\\_1fn5NWp9-RvWxuGCJ7ai4-aKDi5iMZmqo6qt7U8](https://www.sbs.com.au/language/arabic/ar/article/liberals-commit-judas-betrayal-in-opposing-voice/hiqw5mw9m?fbclid=IwAR2Niwi0nZyrnduzqV1_1fn5NWp9-RvWxuGCJ7ai4-aKDi5iMZmqo6qt7U8)

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1 A “Makarrata” is a Yolngu word that means to come together after a struggle or dispute, to make peace.