

By Tom Griffiths AO

The Uluru Statement is full of heart. It is a generous invitation to Australians to ‘walk with us’, to join ‘our trek across this vast country’. It offers inspiration and hope. It suggests a practical, enduring way to achieve ‘a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.’

The Uluru Statement is a gracious, powerful, poetic document and the most significant declaration addressed by First Nations people to the Australian public. It stands alone. But it can also be seen as the latest in a long line of wise, patient petitions by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their fellow Australians.

For more than two hundred years, the First Nations people of Australia have steadfastly petitioned white politicians and their institutions, asking to be heard. A shocking pattern emerges. The more respectful and successful the Indigenous consultations and statements, the more likely they were to be undermined or betrayed by politicians and vested interests. It seems that our white political institutions have long been uncomfortable with Indigenous strength and success.

Take for example the story of Coranderrk in Wurundjeri Country, the Yarra Valley of Victoria. In the 1850s and 60s, reeling under the British invasion, the *ngurungaeta* (leaders) of the Kulin people petitioned to be given back some of their land to farm as compensation for their loss of country and resources. They were first allotted land in the Acheron Valley, which was promised ‘ever should be theirs’ and they worked

it enthusiastically until rival white farmers forced them off. Led by Simon Wonga and William Barak, the Kulin then went in search of another 'promised land', walking across the mountains to the Yarra flats to establish Coranderrk near present-day Healesville.

There they built huts, cleared and worked the land, produced and sold craft, and by 1867 were grinding flour from their own grain and cutting timber at their sawmill. These Aboriginal farmers won gold medals at Royal Agricultural Shows, and scarcely a year went by when hops grown at Coranderrk did not command the highest price at the Melbourne markets. Many white settlers envied their productivity and politicians were amazed yet annoyed by the determination of the Coranderrk residents to manage their own affairs.

The sinister process by which this Aboriginal success was undermined and betrayed has been carefully documented by historians. So has the decade and more of Aboriginal rebellion against this second dispossession. William Barak emerged as a patient supplicant to the invaders' conscience. He led Coranderrk residents in a respectful campaign of delegations, strikes, protests, petitions and letters to the press expressing their concerns to the Victorian government.

Barak and other leaders frequently walked the sixty kilometres from Coranderrk to the Victorian parliament to pay their respects and make their case to an institution they were implored to trust. They wore their best clothes on the long walk and some carried their shoes in their hands. They respected the forms and protocols of government, right down to their footwear.

Nevertheless, in 1886 sixty residents were ejected from Coranderrk, in 1893 half the reserve was excised for white farmers, and in 1924 the settlement was closed.

Tragically, this story of betrayal has been repeated across the nation. But in 2023 I believe Australians will grasp the

extraordinary opportunity afforded by the Regional Dialogues and the historic gathering at Uluru.

For the Uluru Statement is distinctive: it is addressed to the people, not the politicians. The Referendum is our – the people’s – chance to listen and to speak. It is our voice, and we can use it to enable *the Voice*.

A clear majority of Australians already support the Voice. And when I have talked with friends who have expressed doubt about the proposal, the conversation has been constructive and enlightening. Impressively, they have found a way to understand and support it. This is the most important conversation in our country’s history and it has been going on for two centuries and more. Our ancestors, black and white, have invested in this process and our descendants will live our legacy.

The establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution is a culmination of all that has gone before, but it is also just a beginning.