

Breaking the shackles: from moral courage to structural justice

Mokak Oration, 4 November 2025

Hon Ken Wyatt AM JP

Acknowledgement of Country

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we gather this evening – the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples – and pay my deep respect to their Elders past and present.

May our words tonight honour their continuing sovereignty, their law, and their care for Country that has never been ceded and never been broken.

When I stand here and speak of releasing the shackles, I speak not in the metaphor alone.

I speak of iron and chains.

I speak of laws and policies.

I speak of invisible restraints that bind opportunity, silence voices, and hold back futures.

The shackles of the past were visible – cold steel on the wrist or ankles, padlocks on the gate, signs that said ‘forbidden’.

Colonisation brought violence, control, and dehumanisation. Men, women and children – Aboriginal people – were shackled during punitive expeditions, shackled as prisoners on their own Country, shackled for daring to resist.

Communities were confined to reserves, wages stolen, languages silenced, ceremonies banned, kinship broken, poor health and deprived of educational opportunities.

The so-called ‘Protection Acts’ were shackles written into law. They dictated where Aboriginal people could live, when they could leave, how they could work, and even claimed guardianship over their children.

These were not benign policies. They were calculated to control, to confine, to erase.

And yet, through all of this, our people endured. The culture endured.

The fire endured and individuals led policy, institutional and social reforms through their personal vision, passion and determination. And over four decades the Productivity Commission has represented the Voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in their reports to Government to influence change.

Releasing the shackles in those days would have meant more than cutting chains. It would have meant recognition of sovereign nations, restoration of dignity, the right to live on Country according to our own laws, governance, and ways of knowing.

Honouring the architects of freedom

In the summer of 1938, an elderly Yorta Yorta man walked the streets of Melbourne carrying a petition. His name was William Cooper. His handwriting was steady, his conviction unshakable. The petition sought recognition – not charity, not pity, but recognition – of Aboriginal people as citizens and as the first custodians of this land.

He walked door to door, pen in hand, heart on fire.

William Cooper had no office, no funding, no legal standing. What he possessed was moral clarity – and that clarity cracked the first shackle of Australian indifference. He believed that conscience, even when wielded by one man, could shame a nation into seeing itself clearly.

When Parliament refused to receive his petition, he did not surrender.

He organised the *Day of Mourning*, the first national political protest by Aboriginal people. And later that same year, upon hearing of the Nazi program against Jewish people in Germany, William Cooper led a delegation to the German Consulate in Melbourne – the only known private citizen's protest against Kristallnacht anywhere in the world.

In that act, William Cooper broke the first of Australia's shackles – the shackle of silence. He showed that the moral conscience of this country would be measured not by its comfort, but by its courage.

William Cooper's generation planted the seed of resistance; later generations watered it with intellect, vision, and reform.

His petition opened a door that others would stride through decades later. The 1967 Referendum, the land rights movements of the 1970s, and the rise of Aboriginal legal and health services all owe something to that moral beginning.

But each era faced its own shackles – ignorance, exclusion, and paternalism – and each demanded leaders who could turn protest into policy.

He taught us that the conscience of this nation would never again rest easy while its First Peoples were denied dignity.

Cooper's courage lit a fire that others have carried forward – through education, governance, law, health, and culture – transforming grievance into governance and protest into policy.

The first shackle broken was silence itself.

Cooper gave voice to the voiceless, and generations since have turned that moral voice into institutional change.

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue was a proud Yankunytjatjara woman who emerged from very challenging circumstances to become one of Australia's foremost Indigenous leaders and change-makers. Her life and work are deeply relevant to themes of Indigenous self-determination, equity, health, governance and reconciliation.

Her life embodies resilience, the overcoming of structural disadvantage, and the transformation of adversity into leadership.

Dr O'Donoghue did not simply represent Indigenous interests – she institutionalised Indigenous leadership in policy, health and governance.

The shackles Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue broke:

- Cultural dispossession: Transformed the trauma of removal and loss of identity into a lifelong commitment to restoring dignity and voice for the Stolen Generations.
- Institutional racism: Defied systemic exclusion by becoming the first Aboriginal nurse trained at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, opening professional doors for Indigenous Australians.
- Policy exclusion: Broke through government and bureaucratic barriers to lead ATSIC, embedding Indigenous leadership in national decision-making.
- Legal denial of rights: Helped shape the *Native Title Act 1993*, breaking Australia's historical refusal to recognise Indigenous land ownership and sovereignty.
- Stereotypes and silence: Shattered perceptions of Indigenous incapacity by asserting a powerful, articulate presence on the national and international stage.

In the story of this nation, there are those whose courage did more than challenge injustice – they *broke its shackles*.

Two such men – Patrick Lionel Djargun Dodson and Charles Nelson Perkins – stand as towering figures of conscience and change.

Pat Dodson, born in Broome, carries the wisdom of the Yawuru people and the heart of a peacemaker. Ordained as Australia's first Aboriginal Catholic priest, he moved beyond the walls of the Church to enter the heart of the nation's unfinished business – justice and reconciliation. As Commissioner into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, as Chair of the Council for Reconciliation, and as Senator for Western Australia, he guided us toward the truth that reconciliation is not an act of charity – it is an act of nationhood.

He broke the shackle of exclusion – the long silence that kept First Nations voices outside the design of reconciliation itself. Through his moral clarity, he brought those voices to the centre, insisting that reconciliation be shaped *with* us, not *for* us.

And Charles Perkins – from the red earth of the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, rose a man whose defiance reshaped a nation's conscience.

He led the 1965 Freedom Ride, confronting segregation and the quiet cruelty of racism that scarred our towns and our spirit. He became the first Aboriginal graduate of an Australian university, and the first to lead a government department – transforming protest into policy, and struggle into structure.

He broke the shackle of structural racism – proving that intellect, persistence and integrity could dismantle centuries of exclusion. His voice did not ask permission; it demanded justice.

Eddie Mabo turned law into justice, and justice into truth – for all of us. He was a teacher, an activist, custodian who stood against the might of a nation's denial: the lie that this land was *terra nullius*, a land belonging to no one.

Born on Mer, in the Torres Strait, he carried with him a truth that could no longer be silenced – that his people had owned, cared for, and belonged to their land since time immemorial.

And from the islands of the Torres Strait came a voice that would shake the foundations of the law itself. With quiet conviction and relentless truth, he carried his people's story all the way to the High Court of Australia, and there, he changed history.

He broke the shackle of legal denial – the falsehood that this continent was empty before 1788. Through his courage, the High Court of Australia recognised what Indigenous people had always

known: that the land has owners, custodians, stories, and spirit. His victory was not only a change in law – it was a restoration of truth.

Eddie Mabo's legacy reminds us that justice often begins with one voice willing to challenge the silence. He transformed a nation's legal doctrine into a moral awakening – proving that truth, once spoken, cannot be buried.

Together, Dodson, Perkins and Mabo form a trinity of courage – faith, defiance and truth. They remind us that freedom is not found in anger, but in purpose; not in division, but in courage. Their legacies are not relics of the past – they are instructions for our future.

Dr Paul Hughes, a Kokatha man and one of our first Aboriginal teachers, looked around the classrooms of South Australia and asked: *Where are our stories? Where are our children?*

From that question grew the National Aboriginal Education Policy, a framework that shifted education from a tool of assimilation to a pathway of self-determination. As a key architect of the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) in the late 1980s, Dr Hughes was one of Australia's most respected Indigenous education reformers and policy leaders, whose work has transformed national approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, leadership, and cultural inclusion.

Dr Hughes broke the epistemic shackle – the idea that knowledge flowed only in one direction. As a reformer he built bridges between government and community, and whose legacy continues to shape the educational and social aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Professor Marcia Langton AO, a Yiman and Bidjara woman, is among Australia's most influential public intellectuals and advocates for Indigenous rights. Her decades-long career has shaped national debates on land rights, education, economic development, and social justice.

Professor Langton AO, through scholarship and policy, forced Australia to confront its intellectual exclusion of Indigenous people. Her work made it impossible to write about this nation without writing with us, not about us.

Her leadership in the Indigenous Voice Co-Design process and her ongoing advocacy for Indigenous economic empowerment reflect her deep influence on national governance. Marcia's intellect and courage challenge institutions to reckon with both history and responsibility. Langton showed that ideas can be weapons – if they are sharpened by truth and wielded with precision.

Together, Hughes and Langton broke the epistemic shackle – the belief that education was a one-way transmission of Western truth rather than a shared conversation of cultures.

Professor Tom Calma AO, a Kungarakan and Iwaidja man is a distinguished advocate, public servant, and policy reformer whose leadership has shaped national frameworks in health, education, and Indigenous governance.

Professor Calma took the ideals of justice and measured them with evidence. As Social Justice Commissioner (2004–2010), he spearheaded the *Close the Gap* campaign, embedding Indigenous health equality into the national agenda. Later, as Co-Chair of the Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process, Calma helped define pathways for structural inclusion within government.

He reminded Australia that justice cannot be felt until it can be measured.

Through the *Close the Gap* framework, he embedded accountability into the nation's conscience. Policy, he taught us, must not only promise – it must report.

Calma's enduring legacy lies in his capacity to unite community vision with institutional reform – embodying the Oration's spirit of pragmatic, inclusive, and accountable leadership.

And Noel Pearson, through his Cape York reforms, showed that Indigenous policy need not oscillate between dependence and abandonment. He built frameworks of empowerment – welfare reform, education reform, and local governance – rooted in culture but fluent in economics.

Noel Pearson has been one of the most influential Aboriginal thinkers and reformers in modern Australian policy. His ideas have repeatedly influenced both Labor and Coalition governments, showing his ability to bridge ideology in service of pragmatic reform.

He brings a unique perspective that links self-determination with responsibility and opportunity, echoing themes that resonate across government, academia, and community policy circles.

Pearson translates community realities into policy innovation. He challenges policy institutions – like the Productivity Commission – to rethink entrenched systems and focus on empowerment rather than paternalism. He spoke of *responsibility with rights* – of communities not managed but entrusted.

They broke the shackle of fatalism – the quiet, corrosive belief that nothing could change.

The shackles of inertia

Today our challenges are different, but no less heavy.

The shackles of ignorance have been replaced by the shackles of inertia. We have moved from exclusion to inclusion – but too often inclusion without influence.

The question for this generation is not *Are we seen?* It is *Are we heard where decisions are made?*

If the past shackled us in exclusion, the present shackles us in inertia. No longer invisible, but too often unheard. No longer excluded, but too rarely empowered. The challenge now is not visibility, but voice with consequence.

From policy recipients to policy designers: Professor Megan Davis carried Cooper's petition into the Constitution itself. Her leadership of the Uluru Dialogues redefined recognition – not as poetry on paper, but as participation in power.

As an architect of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, she reframed recognition as structure, not symbol.

Through hundreds of dialogues she built consensus – not around charity, but around Voice. She built, through careful dialogue, a blueprint for shared governance – the Voice, Treaty, and Truth trilogy that continues to guide us. Her work exposes the next frontier of freedom: structural inclusion.

Commissioner Selwyn Button represents a new kind of leadership: Indigenous governance inside the machinery of state.

He is not outside knocking on the door – he is inside redesigning the room. From the Productivity Commission to the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, his work has embedded accountability, data, and transparency into policy systems that once only managed Indigenous lives from afar. He is proof that the next frontier of self-determination lies not only in protest but in policy architecture.

Commissioner June Oscar AO and Professor Pat Dudgeon AM have transformed how we measure wellbeing. June Oscar's *Wiyi Yani U Thangani* project elevated the collective voice of Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander women – a revolution in consultation and design, reminding us that policy must begin where life begins: in the strength of women, families, and communities.

Pat Dudgeon, the nation's first Aboriginal psychologist, replaced the vocabulary of pathology with the language of pride. Dudgeon's leadership in mental health reform, through the *Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration*, wove cultural strength into national health frameworks.

Together, they shattered the deficit lens and replaced it with a strengths-based model of resilience, belonging, and collective healing. Together they broke the shackle of deficit – the cruel idea that Indigenous identity was a problem to be solved rather than a source of strength to be shared.

After the Voice referendum, the country stood in a rare moment of quiet – a silence heavy with disappointment, but also charged with possibility. Marcia Langton, Noel Pearson, and Rachel Perkins reminded us that progress does not vanish with a vote. The quest for a fair relationship between First Nations and the state is not a campaign; it is a continuum. Truth-telling, they insist, is not a threat to national unity – it is its foundation. To hide our history is to chain our future.

But there is another kind of shackle – the shackle of forgetting. And to break that, a nation needs storytellers.

Rachel Perkins, a proud Arrernte and Kalkadoon woman, has become one of the great truth-tellers of our time. Through film, documentary, and advocacy, she has turned history into public memory and storytelling into civic duty.

In *First Australians*, she chronicled the unspoken history of this land – not as tragedy alone, but as endurance. In *The Australian Wars*, she made visible what our textbooks hid – the frontier violence that shaped our national landscape. And through her leadership in the Uluru Dialogue, she carried truth-telling into policy reform, arguing that a nation cannot legislate justice if it cannot first remember its own story.

Rachel Perkins broke the shackle of national amnesia. She reminded us that truth-telling is not an act of division – it is an act of repair. That a country's soul cannot heal while its history remains untold.

Her work stands as the cultural mirror to Megan Davis's constitutional vision – one tells the story, the other writes the structure.

Prime Ministers and the politics of hope

I turn to our Prime Ministers and the politics of hope.

While the breaking of shackles in Indigenous affairs has always begun with the moral courage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, there have been moments when Prime Ministers have acted with vision and helped remove parts of those historical chains.

Some acted deliberately; others did so by accident, provoked by Indigenous determination. From the reluctant missteps of William McMahon, whose rejection of land rights in 1972 ignited the Tent Embassy, to the bold reforms of Gough Whitlam, who returned land to the Gurindji people and outlawed racial discrimination, political will occasionally aligned with moral justice.

Whitlam's handful of red earth poured into Vincent Lingiari's palm remains one of the defining images of dignity restored – a gesture that transformed the relationship between government and Aboriginal people from one of control to one of respect.

Malcolm Fraser carried Whitlam's legacy forward, embedding human rights in law and delivering the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, while expanding Indigenous representation in public life. His quiet decency and commitment to bipartisanship broke the shackle of partisanship that had long paralysed reform.

Bob Hawke offered the language of reconciliation, creating ATSIC, supporting the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and committing – though unrealised – to a treaty process. His was a leadership of consensus, giving form to the idea that reconciliation requires shared governance, not mere sentiment.

Paul Keating's tenure turned truth itself into policy. In his 1992 Redfern Park Speech, he shattered decades of denial by naming what the nation had done – the theft of land, the destruction of culture, the removal of children.

Under his government, the *Native Title Act 1993* and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation gave legal and moral architecture to those truths.

Keating broke the shackle of denial; his courage reminded Australians that political power is at its most transformative when it serves historical honesty. His successors continued the work in varied ways: John Howard's contradictions reopened difficult debates on autonomy and protection; Kevin Rudd's 2008 National Apology broke the shackle of shame, transforming empathy into policy and restoring humanity to the national story.

Julia Gillard brought discipline to compassion, embedding accountability through the Closing the Gap Framework, while Malcolm Turnbull's rejection of the Uluru Statement paradoxically reignited public determination for recognition.

Under Scott Morrison, shared decision-making with the Coalition of Peaks marked a shift toward co-design, embedding Indigenous organisations as partners in the policy process. And Anthony Albanese, though unsuccessful in the 2023 Referendum, demonstrated the courage of invitation – offering the Australian people the chance to write equality into the Constitution and opening a door to truth-telling and treaty that will not close again.

Every act of progress in Indigenous policy has required two forms of courage: moral courage from leaders such as William Cooper, June Oscar, and Rachel Perkins, and political courage from those in government who chose to listen and legislate. When those two forms of courage converge, nations change; when they diverge, history stalls.

From Whitlam's red earth to Keating's truth in Redfern, from Rudd's apology to Morrison's Closing the Gap in Partnership with Indigenous Australians to Albanese's invitation, each act loosened one more link in the chain that bound this country to its unfinished past. Yet, as long as equality depends on goodwill rather than law, the work remains incomplete. Each Prime Minister who dared to listen helped lift one shackle from the nation's soul – but only when justice is embedded not as promise, but as principle, will Australia be truly free of them all.

Lessons in leadership: how the shackles were broken

Across these fourteen leaders we can see a pattern – the architecture of Indigenous reform in motion:

- Moral authority – Cooper, Lowitja, Perkins, Dodson and Calma turned conscience into commitment.
- Knowledge and education – Hughes, Langton and Dudgeon translated experience into evidence.

- Structural power – Davis, Button and Pearson redesigned the institutions themselves.
- Cultural memory – Perkins and Oscar gave voice to the emotional truth of our history.

Each teaches us that liberation is not a single act, but a system built differently – that true freedom is the ability to participate in designing the future.

But even as we honour progress, we must confront the new constraints:

- Systemic inertia, where bureaucracy outlasts vision.
- Fragmentation, where culture is divided by portfolio.
- Moral fatigue, where the public mistake apology for closure.
- Economic inequity, where prosperity has not yet found its way to Country.

These are the *soft shackles* – polished, polite, but powerful. They exist not in laws but in habits, not in prejudice but in process. They remind us that colonisation was never just an event; it is a system that must continually be redesigned out of existence.

They are the legacy of well-meaning reform without enduring architecture. And they will persist until we embed Indigenous design into the institutions of the state.

If William Cooper's petition was the moral beginning, the unfinished business of our time is the structural completion.

Structural inclusion means more than consultation:

- It means Indigenous people authoring the policies that govern Indigenous lives.
- It means accountability written into legislation, not into footnotes.
- It means government listening not once, but always.

The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* remains our compass. It invites Australia to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future – not through guilt, but through shared governance.

The 2023 referendum may not have changed the Constitution, but it changed the nation's conversation. It revealed how far we have come and how far we are yet to travel. And it reminded us that defeat is never final when the cause is just.

The 2023 referendum was not the end of the road – it was a crossroad. The nation was asked whether it would enshrine a Voice. Many said no. But even in that 'no', there was something remarkable: the most sustained national conversation on Indigenous justice since Federation. That conversation must not end.

Structural inclusion remains the unfinished business of this nation. It is the final step in breaking the shackles – not through blame, but through balance. It means designing systems with us, not for us. It means embedding our participation in every level of decision-making – from Cabinet to community boardrooms. It means truth in data, respect in design, and partnership in practice.

Imagine an Australia:

- Where the moral conviction of Cooper meets the constitutional craftsmanship of Davis.
- Where the intellectual precision of Langton meets the pragmatism of Pearson to design policy that is both just and effective.
- Where the compassion of Oscar meets the clarity of Calma.

- Where the cultural fire of Lowitja, Charles and Rachel Perkins illuminate the paths that Button, Dudgeon, and others continue to build.
- Where Button's generation governs with transparency, and Dudgeon's and Hughes's legacies shape education and wellbeing as tools of nation-building.

That Australia is not a dream.

This is not a dream of separation but a better future for all our children and grandchildren.

It is already forming – in classrooms, in commissions, in communities. It exists wherever courage meets compassion, and wherever governments learn to listen not to manage, but to trust and empower.

William Cooper once said that *'if we have no voice, we must create one; if we have no place, we must build one'*. He built it with petitions; others have built it with policy, law, and love.

Tonight, as we gather in the spirit of Romlie Mokak – a man who taught the Commission to listen, to act and that data and dignity can co-exist. He proved that data can be a language of dignity – that evidence, when handled with respect, becomes not a tool of measurement but a mirror of justice.

The Mokak Oration exists because of that insight: that policy must always have a pulse, and that numbers must always tell a human story.

So as we gather here tonight, let us honour the architects of our freedom – not just for what they have built, but for what they continue to challenge us to imagine.

The moral arc of this nation bends slowly, but it bends toward justice when we choose to guide it.

When William Cooper carried his petition to Parliament, he sought not revenge, but recognition. When Rachel Perkins filmed the stories of our frontier, she sought not division, but truth. When Megan Davis drafted the Uluru Statement, she offered not despair, but design.

And when this generation carries their legacy forward, they will seek not apology, but equity written into the laws of the land.

Let this be the generation that finally understands: freedom is not achieved when the last chain is broken. It is to melt the metal itself – to reshape the institutions that forged those chains into instruments of inclusion.

Let it remind the Australian Public Service that policy is never neutral; it either liberates or it limits.

And let it remind every Australian that reconciliation is not a destination, but a discipline – a daily act of courage, curiosity, and care.

Let us turn policy into partnership. Let us turn remembrance into reform.

May this be the era when Australia, at last, breaks not only the shackles of the past, but also the subtle, sophisticated shackles of now – and walks together, unbound, into a just and shared tomorrow.

Thank you.