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Another Sorry Day: and no closer to equality

Presentation by

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About the presentation:

It's been ten years since Kevin Rudd apologised in Parliament for the profound grief, suffering and loss inflicted on this country's Aboriginal and Islander people by laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments. Ten years on, we are still waiting for the healing and change Rudd envisioned. Two days after National Sorry Day, Indigenous Affairs Editor for the ABC and special advisor to the prime minister on Indigenous constitutional recognition reflects on this famous apology and questions just how we can Close the Gap and end the inequality.

Denis Moriarty
On Saturday I, along with many other Australians, reflected on our history - a very specific part of our history; one that we are not proud of, nor should we be. Two days ago was National Sorry Day, a day designed to prompt us to remember and commemorate the mistreatment of the country's Aboriginal people, and in particular the Stolen Generations. It's now more than a decade since Kevin Rudd, the then Prime Minister of Australia, apologised to this country's Aboriginal and Islander people for a history of unequal laws and policies. Our next speaker has witnessed this inequality throughout his life. Stan Grant is the Indigenous Affairs Editor for the ABC, and Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on Indigenous Constitutional Recognition.

His constant pursuit of equality and justice has moved many, and his political speeches, and commentary on issues of inequality - both involving indigenous Australians, and otherwise - continue to inspire many; I know they inspire me. His book, 'Talking to my Country', is a must-read for every Australian. Please make him welcome.

Stan Grant
Thank you very much for that, and thank you for clearing all of our heads as well. Before we get down to what I want to talk about over the next hour. I want to pay respect to the Wurundjeri people, on whose land we meet today; and from my people, the Wiradjuri and the Gummilroi, I bring respect and greetings. I was really interested in what Paul Higgins was saying a minute ago about the strategic landscape.

That's what I really want to talk to you about today, with my own reflections on how we lift the questions of indigenous issues in Australia out of a parochial context and look at them as part of the global questions that we're grappling with at the moment – issues of justice and democracy, and what it is to live in a global order that's very much under strain. We're here to talk about reconciliation and mark yet another Sorry Day, to reflect on where we are as a nation.

But first I want to take you back to before Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations a decade ago in 2008. I want to take you back to September 11, 2001. That's a date that that changed our world, and profoundly altered the course of my own life. I remember it clearly. I was about to go to bed, and, as I do, switched on the television news to take one last look at the world. A tower was burning in New York City. The first plane had struck the World Trade Centre. News reporters at the time were talking then about an accident, speculating that it might have just been a light aircraft. But as I watched – as, I'm sure, many of you here today did as well, - another plane slammed into the second tower. Like most of you, I've never forgotten the image of that huge passenger jet hurtling at full speed low over the New York skyline, and that roaring noise, and the moment of impact. I reached for my phone - it was late at night - and I called an American friend and said to her "You must turn on the television."

Our world in that moment had changed. Within hours the world knew of Al-Qaeda. The war on terror began, and it hasn't ended. For me, within a matter of weeks I was working for the American network CNN. It began a decade-long odyssey that took me to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. I saw bombings, and far, far too many dead bodies.

I spoke to those who had survived these attacks, and to the terrorists who'd carried them out. In May 2010, I stood outside Osama Bin Laden's house in Abbottabad, in Pakistan, after American troops had stormed it in the middle of the night, killing the Al-Qaeda leader and bookending a remarkable decade. So why does this matter? How does this fit into our discussion here today? Because it marks a fundamental turning point in our world, and because it poses questions that impact profoundly on the future of our democracies, and ultimately questions of indigenous rights here in Australia.

I've seen our world turn. It's been a front row seat at history. It's led me to ask harder and more complex questions about who we are, the role of race and identity, and the future of our world order.

Now I want to take you back even further – to the summer of 1989, when Francis Fukuyama, a then little-known analyst at the US State Department, penned an essay for the magazine National Interest. He called it, 'The End of History?' That question mark is important, as you'll come to see. This was after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the great Cold War stand-off between east and west - communism versus capitalism. That standoff had stretched for nearly half a century. It had fueled war in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, amongst others; and it had at times threatened to tip our world into outright nuclear war. We came so perilously close. But here was the triumph of the west. Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy might constitute, in his words, "The end point of mankind's ideological evolution. The final form of human government. Indeed, the end of history."

It may sound strange to say, “the end of history,” because of course history does not “end” as such. There are always events, and the lives of all of us continue, but Fukuyama was talking about history in a different and altogether more profound sense. He was talking about history as the struggle for justice, for freedom, and for recognition. He was talking about an arc of progress that he believed had now delivered humanity to its summit. It wasn’t an original idea – it was rooted in the work of the monumental German philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel. It was Hegel who first believed he had seen the end of history when he glimpsed the triumphant Napoleon after the Battle of Jena in 1806. As Hegel said, “I saw the Emperor, this world spirit, go out from the city to survey his realm, stretching over the world and dominating it.” Hegel, and thus Fukuyama, believed in history as progress — that we moved through different epochs to an absolute spirit.

For Hegel this was Napoleon, for Fukuyama this was the idea of liberal democracy. And central to this idea of freedom and recognition. Yes, the campaign for recognition here in Australia, indigenous recognition in the Constitution or in treaties, is rooted in philosophy. The Greeks called it *thymos*, a part of the soul from which rises the desire for self-esteem. Hegel said that this separated humans from animals: “We desire to be recognised by other humans.” Hegel said it was the very engine of history itself. People would stake their lives in combat to achieve it. As Fukuyama wrote, “These parts of the human personality are critical to political life.” To Hegel an individual only achieved self-consciousness by being recognised by other human beings; we wished to be recognised by humans, and recognised as human. Someone subjugated by politics, history, hierarchy cannot be free. To Hegel, both the master and the slave were locked in a struggle to be free.

Hegel saw this in the great revolutions of France and America that gave rise to new forms of political representation that threw off old hierarchies. To Hegel history came to an end because the struggle for recognition had been met in societies categorised by universal and reciprocal recognition. Surveying the world in 1989, Francis Fukuyama certainly believed the world had reached its end point. As he wrote back then, "As mankind approaches the end of the millennium, the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potential universal validity: liberal democracy - the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty." In many ways that argument is born out. According to Freedom House, which measure the spread and health of democracy, in 1970 there were fewer than 30 countries that counted themselves as democracies; by 2014 there were more than 140, about 70% of the world.

Who sitting here today, with all the troubles that we have in our country, would opt to live in Syria, or Iran, or Russia, or China, rather than to live with the freedoms that we enjoy in liberal democracies? As Winston Churchill famously said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." The end of history indeed. But remember how I mentioned that question mark at the end of the title of Fukuyama's essay, 'The End of History?' In later writings, including a book on the subject, Fukuyama dispensed with the question – the end of history became a statement of fact. He would come to wish he hadn't done that. What we've seen in the three decades since the end of the Cold War, far from the end of history, is in fact the return of history. New ideological battles have emerged, new battles from old wars. The world today is awash with conflict. We've seen a resurgence of sectarianism, authoritarianism, and political tribalism.

The very ideal of liberalism that undergirds democracy is under attack. The political scientist David Runciman has written "This is the crisis facing western democracies. We don't know what failure looks like anymore, and we have no idea how much danger we are in." The political scientist Peter Mair opened his 2013 book, 'Ruling the Void: the hollowing out of western democracy', with this sentence: "The age of democracy is dead." Political parties, he argued, have become disconnected from wider society. There is a fractured political landscape, crises of legitimacy and effectiveness. Three significant events stand out. One is the rise of Islamist terrorism, as I talked about with Al-Qaeda; one is the Global Financial Crisis; and one is the increasing power of China. When I saw those twin towers collapsing I was watching the return of history. This was a rejection of the very values that Fukuyama's liberal democracies were said to represent by a small, but enormously influential, radicalised group of Islamists. Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda had weaponised religion, not for the first time in history, and violently rejected the ideals of univeralism and individualism.

In 2008 the collapse of the big banks, which sparked what has become known as the Global Financial Crisis, rocked the foundations of the liberal democratic order. On a personal level, economic collapse cost jobs, and homes. More broadly, as The Economist magazine pointed out, the damage the crisis did was psychological as well as financial. It revealed fundamental weaknesses in the West's political systems, undermining the self-confidence that had been one of their greatest assets. People who lost their homes and livelihoods looked on as the newly elected US President, Barak Obama - a man whose own elevation to the White House was meant to presage a new dawn for his country - let the bankers off scot free. They were deemed too big to fail. Those who profited from a corrupt exploitative system, who had rigged the game in their favour, signing up gullible, vulnerable people to a complex financial shell game, paid no price.

The government propped them up as people went to the wall. The Global Financial Crisis has shone a spotlight on the growing inequality that's eroding the democratic order (an issue that I know you've been discussing here today). If democracies cannot deliver on the promise of a better future, then the future of democracy itself is at risk.

While the liberal democratic west has struggled, China has continued to grow. It was able to withstand the Global Financial Crisis, and suddenly to present an alternative. The Chinese Communist Party could claim that it has a better model. I spent a decade reporting from China for CNN, witnessing the economic miracle that lifted half a billion people out of poverty, and took a country once known as the 'sick man of Asia', to the point where it is, by some measurements, the biggest economy in the world. And China has done so while rejecting the ideas of universal human rights and democracy.

As China gets richer and more powerful it is not embracing liberalism. It is doubling down on authoritarianism. As someone who has reported from there, who was locked up on several occasions, harassed, and surveilled, who had their family continuously followed, I can tell you it is much easier to report in a country like Australia than to report in China.

Others have been looking on. Many countries have taken an autocratic turn, weakening their own democracies. Turkey, under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is cracking down on opponents and locking up journalists. Vladimir Putin jails his rivals. Hungary's Viktor Orbán has transformed from a one-time student democracy campaigner to a political demagogue.

Orban, indeed, has introduced a new phrase to politics - 'illiberal democracy': democracy stripped of all of those liberal values that we here continue to try to hold on to.

Freedom House, which once counted the spread of democracy, released a report, 'Freedom in the World 2015 – Discarding Democracy: The Return of the Iron Fist'. It found an erosion in civil liberties and the rule of law, and claims that democracy – which, you will remember, was at a high point in the early 2000s -was under greater threat than at any point in the last 25 years. Since then two more events have shaken global politics – Brexit, and the Trump presidency. In the words of political writer David Goodhart, "The two events marked not so much the arrival of the new populist era, but its coming of age." Goodhart says "They were about a core values divide. People who felt that their country and their political leadership no longer spoke to them." They were looking for alternatives, even if that alternative meant leaving the European Union or electing Donald Trump.

Britain's vote to leave the EU highlighted a flaw in the European Project, and globalisation more broadly: that it weakens ideas of national sovereignty. You'll often hear people say that they've lost their country – that open borders, open trade, free trade, the free movement of people, has eroded the sense of what it is to belong. David Goodhart writes that "The desire to transcend nation, to put 'nation' in the past, was at the heart of the European Project." But as Ivan Krastev, another political writer, has said in his book, 'After Europe', "The EU has always been an idea in search of a reality." Countries lose control of their borders and their economies, and blowback is inevitable.

Donald Trump identified those same anti-globalisation, anti-deindustrialisation tensions to win the White House, campaigning on the promise of secure borders and tougher trade - America first. Anti-immigration, and America first. He has ridden a wave of populism that has seen disruptors win office, or strengthen their foothold, in elections around the world. There is a paradox where democracy is being eroded by those who are using democracy itself to entrench their power.

Harvard University Professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have written a book called "How Democracies Die". Democracies die, they say, in war, and they also die at the hands of elected leaders – Presidents (or Prime Ministers) who subvert the very process that brought them to power. They worry about Donald Trump's attack on some of the institutions of democracy – judges and the media – and fear that the United States will abandon its role as a democracy promoter. But, they write, "This democratic drift precedes Trump. The soft guardrails of American democracy have been weakening for decades." Trump is a litmus test of our political age – a celebrity non-politician whose pledge to 'drain the swamp' resonated with an angry, ignored electorate. Levitsky and Ziblatt now worry about a post-Trump future marked by polarisation, more departures from unwritten political conventions, and increasing institutional warfare. In other words, democracy without solid guardrails.

So what about Australia? We were cushioned against the worst of the Global Financial Crisis, in no small part because of China and its thirst for our national resources. But here, too, democracy as we know it is under stress. Here, too, there is a loss of faith and trust in institutions. We've had Royal Commissions into our justice system, our churches, and, currently, our banks. Public disaffection is growing, especially with the major parties.

At the 2016 Federal Election, up to a third of voters rejected both the ALP and the Liberal-National coalition.

Opinion polls indicate nothing has changed. At both state and federal levels increased volatility is rewarding minor parties and independents. Voters have shown themselves especially keen on shaking up the make-up of the Senate. People are fleeing to the fringes, to the margins where elections are increasingly fought and won. Parties like Pauline Hanson's One Nation wield an outsized influence.

All of this brings us to the question of indigenous rights. That survey of the post-Cold War globe is crucial. This goes to Paul Higgin's idea about the strategic landscape. Indigenous issues go to the very heart of the liberal democratic experiment. Indigenous rights pose critical questions for liberalism, questions we're still struggling to answer. The liberal project emerging out of the 17th century Age of Enlightenment encompassed also the age of discovery, dispossession, and subjugation of indigenous peoples. As the political philosopher Duncan Iveson has pointed out, indigenous peoples were excluded from participating equally in the establishment of the international state system. Some indigenous people reject liberalism as an ideology fundamentally incompatible with their claims for justice. That is, in my view, a self-defeating view that ignores potentially liberating ideas contained in liberalism itself.

As Iveson has pointed out, it's not a matter of simply discarding European thought, but rather seeing how it can be taken hold of, translated, and renewed from, and for, those people on the margins. Iveson asks "Can liberal democracy become genuinely inter-cultural?"

He points out that the claims of indigenous people can question the source, and the legitimacy of state authority. He asks “How can a nation become morally rehabilitated? How might the narratives of the nation be re-told?”

The narrative of the nation: think about that phrase, because it asks us, who are we? It raises critical questions of history and identity. French historian Ernest Renan grappled with these themes more than a century ago. He wrote that “Nations seek a collective identity.” A nation, he wrote, “is a soul, a spiritual principle.” But how to form a nation out of the conflicting stories of Austra;lia’s past?

This past year we have seen indigenous people present the nation with a unique opportunity. The Uluru Statement emerged from a nationwide deliberative process of discussion and negotiation with indigenous communities, peak bodies, and individual leaders, conducted by the federal-parliament-appointed Referendum Council. The negotiations culminated in a meeting at Uluru drawing together representatives from across the country, and the statement calling for, amongst other things, a truth and justice process; a move to drafting a Makarrata. Makarrata is a Yolgnu word from Arnhem Land that speaks of acknowledging peace after a struggle. The Uluru Statement sought to blend the fundamental spiritual sovereignty of indigenous people with the political sovereignty of the Commonwealth. Its key recommendation was an indigenous body, a voice enshrined in the Constitution to ensure that indigenous people have some input into policy making directed toward them.

The Uluru Statement is a remarkable document. It is a profound statement, and a commitment to the principles of democracy.

That it comes from those who have carried the greatest burden, and who have felt the most estranged from this nation's democratic process, makes it all the more remarkable. The Prime Minister, as we know, has rejected that key recommendation for a constitutional voice. But the fight goes on.

Remember Hegel, and what he said about the fight for recognition and how that drives history. Indeed, to borrow from Frank Fukuyama, the Uluru Statement may represent our end-of-history moment, when we complete our liberal democracy. This is a critical issue for us as a nation. It happens at a time when liberal democratic traditions are under siege, when some are talking about the end of liberalism and the death of democracy. This is the defining issue of our times. There is no more important issue right now than whether the foundations of a global order – a global order that has been maintained since World War II, that has led to us living longer than ever before, that has led to the longest sustained period of global peace the world has ever known, that has made us richer and healthier, that has led to innovations that allow us now to imagine a whole new future – will stand.

All of that could potentially be at risk from the struggle of our age. Do those fundamental principles of democracy and freedom persist, or do we lurch into a new era of authoritarianism and illiberalism? That is the choice many people are making right now. The question of indigenous rights fits into a global struggle for justice, recognition, and liberalism. If those people who have carried the heaviest weight and borne the greatest burden can present what Galarrwuy Yunupingu called "A gift to the nation," the Uluru Statement, allowing a way into this democracy for those people who have been locked out – if indigenous people can present that to Australia at this time, it's an extraordinary gift, and one that we should not overlook.

I'm heartened by the words of the French political writer and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville, who in the 19th Century famously travelled to America to encounter that nation's experiment in democracy. He saw the best and the worst, but, as he wrote, "Democracies always look weaker than they really are. They are all confusion on the surface, but have lots of hidden strengths." The challenge for us in Australia is to determine whether among those hidden strengths is a capacity to complete the work of this country and to bring those people locked out of the idea of democracy into what it means to be Australian in the 21st Century.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

Question 1

My name's Inala. I'm a Yarri woman. I bring warm greetings from my family and ancestors to you and yours. Thank you for speaking to my country, it resonated so deeply. My question is about decolonisation. As indigenous people and communities, should we channel our energies into decolonising and deconstructing the systems that we're in, or into reconstructing and reconstituting our own systems? Or both?

Stan Grant

That's a really good question – a fundamental question that goes to exactly the type of strains that I was talking about. The challenge for liberalism has always been encompassing the rights of people who are outside the liberal western tradition. For many indigenous people it's a struggle to get past the foundations of liberalism, which walked hand in hand with colonialism and imperialism.

That approach almost demands that people give up their own cultural traditions to become part of a more liberal tradition. I've really struggled and wrestled with that, because having been a reporter and having seen the worst of the world, if there is one thing I know it's that I would rather be an Aboriginal person living in Australia in this time than anyone else, living anywhere else, at any other time. For all of our faults, I would sooner be an Aboriginal person living here now than in my grandfather's time, or my father's time.

We have more Aboriginal university graduates today than we've ever had in our history. We often talk, for instance, about the imprisonment statistics – and we should, because indigenous people are proportionally far over-represented in prison. In Australia today there are around about 40,000 people in prison. Of those about 25% are indigenous, so about 10,000 indigenous people are locked up - as I say, far too many, proportionally.

But there are almost 40,000 Aboriginal people with a university degree – 40,000. Four times the number of people locked up today. I would sooner focus on these things. We can carry two thoughts; at the same time. We can carry the thought of our success, and our achievement, and our resilience, and we can we can continue to point out just how far we still have to travel. So this fundamental question – do we reconstitute our forms, or do we deconstruct the system to find a better fit for ourselves? – is a question I grapple with constantly.

I've arrived at this point. I am a cosmopolitan person. I am not just indigenous. I carry the blood of an Irish convict in my family ancestry, my mother's mother was white; I am coloniser and colonised.

These are the contradictions of my own life, and my own family's background, as they are the contradictions of Australians as a nation. We are a family who share much more in common, and yet we still have to grapple with the historical legacy that continues to divide us. We live with these contradictions. I'm a person who has enjoyed a career that I could never have imagined having when I was growing up as a boy. We were a poor marginalised black family. We moved from town to town. I didn't go to school properly until I was 14 years old. I changed school more than 14 or 15 times before I was even into high school. We were constantly moving, looking for work. I've grown up to have a life where I've travelled the world, I've lived in five different countries, I've reported from more than 80.

I am a privileged person in Australia, by any measurement. So how do I marry those contradictions? I'm a member of the most disadvantaged group in Australia, but I'm at the same time an extraordinarily privileged Australian. We need to grapple with these contradictions, and we need to have a bigger view of the issues that affect us. Cosmopolitanism says that you are a person in the world – you are a global citizen – but I'm also rooted in a sense of place and a sense of identity. Philosophers have talked about the idea of 'rooted cosmopolitanism' – that we hold to our traditions, the things that ground us, while at the same time we're free to explore all the things that we want to be. Most indigenous people today, the overwhelming number, live in our cities and towns. The overwhelming number are mixed heritage, just like me. The majority have partners who are non-indigenous.

These are complicating issues to any very narrow ideas of identity. These are complex things, so when we ask ourselves "Do we decolonize, or do we reconstitute the old traditions?"

I don't see it as being that sort of a binary question. I think we need to open up more space within the idea of liberal democracy to incorporate the full range of who we are, to be able to bring different traditions to bear. Otherwise the liberal democratic tradition itself, and that foundation, will fracture. And I think that's what lies at the heart of the Uluru Statement. I think that's what lies at the heart of what indigenous campaigners for indigenous rights have been pushing for for decades: this idea that we can bring who we are to this country and find a place in this country, and broaden and widen the idea of what it is to belong. I think that's the journey that we're on – and we're nowhere near getting to the final point of that. It's a complex, complicated, confusing journey, but these are the issues that face us in the world.

Question 2

Stan, thanks for your presentation, and also for your response to the last question. The Uluru Statement has been rejected out of hand by Turnbull. How shattering was that response to you and other people involved in the whole process? Where do you go from here?

Stan Grant

For those people who are directly involved in it, they've continued that struggle and there's an ongoing political process. The Prime Minister may have said that he disagrees or rejects elements of it, but there's now a parliamentary committee, and they're looking at different ways of being able to incorporate some of the aspirations and ambitions contained in that Uluru Statement. That political process continues.

I don't think you can ever just draw a line in the sand and say "That's it, we give up" or "It's no longer worth the fight." This is an evolutionary process. When the constitution was written, indigenous people were not counted as members of the Commonwealth. That didn't deter people from beginning a process of activism that led to the 1967 referendum.

The 1967 referendum wasn't an end in itself, either. It gave rise to a new generation of protests, the 1972 Tent Embassy, and the push for land rights. The push for land rights led to people like Eddie Mabo, who'd lost at every single turn through the Queensland courts, finally going all the way to the Supreme Court to have acknowledged what we always knew – that *terra nullius*, empty land, the extinguishment of Aboriginal rights to land, was a fiction, and that the recognition of those rights could be incorporated within Australia's system of justice and could be legislated within our political system. So I don't think it's an option to just say "We give up" – that we take this rejection as a permanent no. This is the to and fro of a political process. This is why democracies need constant vigilance. This is what it is to be in a democracy—it's to participate, it's to push against those boundaries, it's to challenge.

There'll be an election, people will be able to vote precisely on these types of issues. If these things matter to you, make it part of your vote. It's also important to point out that there are many communities within what we see as the indigenous community. Different people have different views, and different communities seek different things and different outcomes. That's what it is to live in a democracy, to push against that, to have your voice heard, to be able to use those freedoms to challenge the system, to look for new innovations.

People like Duncan Iveson ask “Can you make a process that traditionally worked against indigenous people incorporate the aspirations of indigenous people?” That’s really the business we’re in, I think.

Question 3

Thank you, Stan. I started a conversation with you once at a book launch in Melbourne, but you’ve said something now that’s rattled me. I’ve done a lot of work with Uncle Boydie, the grandson of William Cooper. He walked with his grandfather to the original Day of Mourning in ’38, at Australia Hall (when Australian politicians say “What’s this recent fuss about Australia Day?”, it’s clearly not recent). Your answer to the last question was that we shouldn’t give up on the politicians, and that we can vote, and about what political aspirants can do about the challenges of the year since the Statement from the Heart was rejected.

But the politicians that I and others have talked to about why they rejected it have said, in a very nice pat answer, “The community doesn’t care.” The Australian community doesn’t care, and those that do want change just want it – whether it’s treaty, whether it’s constitutional recognition – so that they can say “We’ve ticked the box, we’ve shut up those Aboriginal people with their demands, now shut up and move on with something else.” And that’s the only reason that maybe something will get through. I’d love your response.

What about the comments that the politicians are making, that the broader Australian community doesn’t really care? Perhaps you can offer some strategies, not just with the political enterprise but with the groundswell at the grassroots, please.

Stan Grant

Look at the Uluru process, for instance. That was a community driven process. People went around to different communities, and different people represented their communities at the Uluru summit. This was a deliberative community-based process. Yes, communities can be actively involved. More broadly, the idea that the Australian community *per se* doesn't care…. let's not forget that the single most successful referendum in Australian history, in 1967, at a time when people like my father were being beaten up in jails, were being locked up for being black, was about Aboriginal rights. We've had 44 referendums in Australia, and only eight have been successful. For that one, almost 100% of the population voted yes. And that was a community driven political movement, a grassroots, ground-up, knock-on-the door political movement. People like Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls, a political giant amongst Aboriginal people, went around knocking on doors and motivating people, getting people behind that cause. I think what happens, politically, is that we've become so polarised and so fractured, because of the very issues that I talked about – the hollowing out of democracy, the sense that many people have that democracy doesn't speak to me anymore – that we've seen people driven to the margins.

Increasingly elections are fought on issues at the margins. If we go to an election, we know that roughly 38-39% of people are going to vote Labor and 39-40% are going to vote Liberal. The figures may switch around a little, but that's basically locked in. So what about that other 20%? That's where elections are won, and that other 20% is growing. A third of people are now no longer interested in voting for either of the major parties. Groups like One Nation and others are still small parties, but with outsized influence. What we see is a political discourse that appeals to those fringes, that seeks to garner that support while ignoring the great majority of Australians who may want a very different political outcome.

So I wouldn't necessarily agree with the premise that people don't care or don't want the change. I don't think that's reflected in our political discourse, which is far more fractured and polarized than that, and which is focused on appealing to the margins where the votes are to harvest those votes to get back into power. If you think about Australians more broadly, I was born before '67 and I've seen an enormous shift in my own lifetime. before '67. If you look at the arc of that change though '67, the Mabo decision, and where we are today I've seen an enormous change. I've seen enormous awareness growing amongst people. I don't think we should lose sight of that and be distracted by the politics of our own more fractured and polarized age.

Question 4
My name's Chantelle. I'm a Barkindji woman. I guess my question for you is more -

Stan Grant
Oh, that's near my people.

Question 4
Yes, both New South Wales mob.

Stan Grant
Yeah, I've got some Barkindji family actually.

Question 4
Oh cool.

Stan Grant
Yeah, Wilcannia.

Question 4
We're mob then, that's where my family's from.

Stan Grant
True. You know Johnsons in Wilcannia?

Question 4
Yes.

Stan Grant
My grandmother was <laughter>… This is what we do.

Question 4
This is how you connect, you know you're mob when this done.

Stan Grant
My grandmother's Johnson.

Question 4
Okay, my grandmothers are Riley and Evans and stuff.

Stan Grant
Okay.

Question 4
And Edwards. We'll talk after.

Stan Grant
See, there you go.

Question 4
I guess mine's more of an internal question, I guess. Being a fair-skinned Aboriginal woman, most of the time when I go to events I have to publicise -

Stan Grant
Prove and justify, yeah.

Question 4
- my identity.

Question 4
Not just for myself, but for when I'm going as well. And I guess walking between two worlds I'm actually finding it more challenging to walk in our world than I am in the non-Aboriginal world.

And my question is, I'm striving to be successful, because I know that to – because I don't come from the right family, I don't come from the right skin colour, there's arguments about my tribal heritage and all those sort of complexities that you can't discuss with white people, because Aboriginality in itself is a struggle we're still trying to – my grandmother just passed, and she was the gate keeper that stopped me from going home. And it was actually my non-indigenous father who protected me, but it was my Aboriginal family that was a danger to me. But these are conversations you can't have outside of community.

Stan Grant
No, no.

Question 4
But then you start to challenge them in a community, and you get attacked. So I guess my question is, is I'd start to challenge my community on the idea of success as an Aboriginal woman. I'm striving to become successful as an athlete, because I see the likes of Nova Peris, Cathy Freeman, they're identifiably Aboriginal; how many identifiably famous Aboriginal people do we have that are fair skinned?

Stan Grant
Well, I knew you were one of us as soon as I saw you there. We know who we are, right? We do. This will have to be the last question, because I do have a plane to catch – I'm on air again tonight. This is the madness of my life. But this is such a brilliant question. I'm so glad I got to you. Because I could tell while I was talking about some of those things they were resonating with you.

The idea of identity is caught up with the politics of our age. Part of the reason that we are seeing this polarisation, this fracturing of our political order, is because people are privileging identity over citizenship. Rather than building civic bonds, which is much harder, we are retreating to our own corners, and that's dangerous. That is really dangerous. William Cooper, who you mentioned; Doug Nicholls, who I spoke about; the people who campaigned for 1967: Eddie Mabo – the power of those struggles was that they were building stronger foundations of our civic identity, what links us as Australians.

That doesn't mean that I'm Australian the same way that you're Australian, or anyone else is Australian: we bring different things to this idea of what it is to be Australian. But they were about building solid platforms for that. I think that's what the Uluru Statement is about, I think that's what treaty is about. I think when you listen to people talk about these things it's in terms of completing the idea of what it is to be an Australian. If we retreat into hardened identities, I know where that ends up, it ends up in conflict; and I've seen this all around the world. Look at the conflicts of our age – Sunni versus Shi'a, Israeli versus Palestinian, in Rwanda - the Rwandan genocide - Hutu versus Tutsi, North versus South Korea. What happened in Yugoslavia, in the Balkans. What happens in America - the American south versus the north, they're still fighting over the legacy of the Civil War.

Identity rooted in a sense of historical grievance lies at the heart of all conflict in our world today. It is foundational, it is fundamental. The Indian philosopher and economist Amartya Sen calls these things 'solitarist identities'. He says solitarist identities - identities that exclude - kill. They lead to violence. What he talks about is layered identity. I am a Wurundjeri-Gummilroi person, I am a journalist, I'm a husband, I'm a father.

I lived outside of Australia for 18 years. I speak a little bit of Chinese - well, I lived there for 10 years, I can order food and get taxis. All of these things complete me, they're all a part of me. I don't privilege one part of myself over another, but in different context different parts of me have greater importance. When I'm back home amongst my own family, my own people, of course the society, and the heritage, and the culture and the history that I'm from is front and centre.

But if I'm in New York, or London, or Paris, people may see me just as an Australian; another aspect of my identity will come to the fore. When I'm at work, I'm a journalist, and there are aspect of an identity as a professional that will come to the fore. It doesn't mean that one cancels another out, it means that they round out the idea of you, they add layers to who you are. And I think this goes to your fundamental point, which is that when you're an Aboriginal person and you don't conform to particular stereotypes - when you're not identifiably black, when you're successful, so you're not disadvantaged, when you don't meet those general preconceptions about what it is to be Aboriginal - the onus is somehow then on you to prove who you are. The Australian Law Reform Commission counts 64 different definitions of what it is to be Aboriginal over Australia's history. Sixty-four different times we've had different labels applied to us.

In the last census I had to tick the box, which you were asked to tick as well, saying "Are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?" They didn't ask whether I was Wurundjeri or Gummilroi. No other Australian had to do that, we have to do that. And if I tick that box, how can that box contain all of the layers of my identity? And identity is not a foundation for justice. Identity is your personal choice, it's the many contradictions and distinctions in your own life.

Ideas of justice need to be built on neutrality, and foundations of universal ideas of justice, that all of us, irrespective of our political views or our particular ethnic , can actually be a part of. What you're saying is that the discussion within our communities is often more difficult than the discussion that I can have with all of your today: because when you come from a people who have experienced the history that we've experienced, there is a wariness, there is a suspicion.

People are suspicious of you if you're too successful. People wonder about you if you're too light skinned - you know, "So you're only identifying as Aboriginal now, are you? Because that suits you."

That is, in its own way, to go back to the very first question I got today, that's a colonised mind. Amongst our own people, those people that try to question your identity, or your validity as an Aboriginal person, are expressing the same view as the coloniser who told us that we were different, we were lesser, because we were Aboriginal, because we were black. If we use that against each other, that is a colonised mind.

I watched the royal wedding last week with my wife, and it was a really interesting moment. Because I was sitting there, with my wife, who's non-indigenous; her mother, whose long-time partner is a New Zealand Maori; her sister from Hawaii, who's married to a native Hawaiian; and my son.

So there we were, all mixed, all part of each other, family, watching Meghan Markle, with a black mother and white father, marrying Prince Harry; and I thought "What is this power that we give to the idea of race?"

All anyone could talk about was Meghan Markle being mixed race. Why was she seen as mixed race, and no one else there?

You know, DNA will tell you that we all share each other's DNA, we are all related to each other in various ways. There is no different species of human being, we are just humans, Homo Sapiens. When you deconstruct it, and you tear all those things away, what are you left with? You're left with the idea of race as a social construct, and it's a social construct that has been used against people. It's been used to identify you as different and other, and on the basis of that identification you will then be segregated, or subjugated.

It has been used to justify colonialism, invasion, holocaust, genocide - all the things that we've seen in our world - on the basis of a fictitious, unscientific idea of race.

For our own people as well, if we don't stop using the discourse of race, if we don't start talking about universal ideas of justice, if we don't open up ideas of identity to involve and encapsulate all the layers of who we are, all the contradictions of who we are – you can walk through the worlds a Barkindji woman, you can also walk through the world as someone who has European heritage. You're a successful person, you're an athlete, all of those things are part of who you are.

If people try to limit us, if people try to put their own definitions of who you are on us, they are buying into that same defunct, unscientific, colonised concepts of race that are completely outdated and redundant.

And I think that's where we need to be focusing. So I'm glad you asked that question, it's a good question. Thank you very much.

Denis Moriarty
Thank you, Stan. I know you have to rush off, so let's give him a round of applause as he's leaving the room.

ENDS

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