

# A Voice Crying in the Wilderness: the fate of truth in public discourse

Address prepared for Christians for an Ethical Society 12 October 2023

## 1. **The Referendum on Saturday 14 October, 2023 concerns a Voice Crying in the Wilderness.**

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a prophetic word from the First Nations people of this country now called Australia. It comes from the centre of the largest island continent on the globe. It comes from the desert. In some important respects it echoes an earlier voice to principalities, powers and authorities. Hence, I refer to it as a voice crying in the wilderness; or if you like, a voice crying from the wilderness.

The Uluru Statement is an invitation from a group of First Nations people to non-Indigenous Australians. Shared in 2017, the Statement calls for substantive reform to help realise Indigenous rights, through the establishment of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament and a Makarrata Commission. 'Makarrata' is a multi-layered Yolŋu word understood as the coming together after a struggle. The Statement specifies that the Makarrata Commission would undertake processes of agreement-making (treaty) and truth-telling. The three key pillars of substantive reform called for in the Statement are:

- Voice – a constitutionally enshrined representative mechanism to provide expert advice to Parliament about laws and policies that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

- Treaty – a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations peoples that acknowledges the historical and contemporary cultural rights and interests of First Peoples by formally recognising sovereignty, and that land was never ceded.
- Truth – a comprehensive process to expose the full extent of injustices experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to enable shared understanding of Australia’s colonial history and its contemporary impacts.

The Uluru Statement comes after decades of research, reports, dialogue and calls for genuine substantive reform to recognise and protect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of these lands and waters. The Australian Government announced on 23 March 2023 that it would hold a referendum in 2023, to ask the Australian people whether they agree to recognising the First Peoples of Australia in the Constitution by establishing an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The Referendum constitutes a prophetic moment for Australian society. As the Australian Constitution makes clear the Voice is an outsider’s voice; not an insider’s voice. It is a voice from the desert both literally and metaphorically. Some years ago, 1973 to be exact, the noted Australian historian Geoffrey Serle wrote *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788-1972*. It was a landmark book is a short history of literature, art, music, theatre, architecture, science and learning in Australia. It was the winner of the 1974 National Book Council Award for Australian Literature. The Voice to Parliament comes from the desert; it is a sign of the creative spirit of the First Peoples of this country; it is not only prophetic, but its ancestry stretches quite a few years before 1788. It is the

truth of this people; their being on and for this country that is before the diverse peoples of Australia.

And the Voice cries from the 'wilderness'. The wilderness is a metaphor for many things; a place of retreat and renewal (as in early monasticism and numerous contemporary religious and secular forms); a place of torment, struggle and temptation (Jesus sojourn in the wilderness is a well-known example); a place of revelation, new insights creative gestures; a place of empowerment and hope. In the context of the Referendum the wilderness is the place of competing voices; of overbearing static and noise; shrill and discordant voices; lying voices; mocking voices; voices of lament; voices of hope. In this cacophony of sounds, some critical questions have emerged: **Can a true voice be heard amidst the rabble and static? Whose voice are we listening to? What makes it difficult to hear a true voice?** The search for a true voice is double edged: a search for truth and truthful story tellers. What is remarkable about public discourse regarding the Referendum over the past 12 months is the way in which the being of First Nations People has not been regarded as the truth before us, but rather this ancient people have been the object of our judgements. To this extent the search for a true voice and the search for truthful tellers has been blindsided by other interests and desires. I want to briefly raise a number of background issues that impact upon what I've called the fate of truth in public discourse as this relates to the First nations People of Australia.

- 2. The truth is not just out there; but rather it is a property of our creaturely being**

This may seem an overly abstract point to make but it underlies something significant for our discussion which I hope to say more of shortly. The concept of the true or truth belongs to what the ancient philosophers (Plato, Aristotle then Augustine then Medieval Scholastics) referred to as Transcendentals (from Latin *transcendere* – meaning to exceed). Those properties of being these days commonly named as truth, unity, goodness and beauty. They are fundamental to our creaturely being. They are first concepts, the One, the Good, the True and since they cannot be logically traced back to something preceding them. Each transcends/exceeds the limitations of place and time, and is rooted in being. The transcendentals are not contingent upon cultural diversity, religious doctrine, or personal ideologies, but are the objective properties of all that exists. Theologically we might say that the transcendentals are part of our createdness per se and as such belong to humans as bearers of the image of God. As such truth is a property of being and not simply an external thing; something invented out there. The search for what is true necessarily involves regard for that which inheres in the thing itself, for example, in the being of a person, of a people, who and how they are constituted. Truth has ontological weight and such truth is before us to behold and respond to. Something serious occurs when we ignore this and treat truth primarily as an external feature of things. Of course, the rise of modern science and the quest for new knowledge pushes us in this latter direction. When this occurs, truth becomes more focussed on questions of knowledge and the science of knowing, epistemology. The ontological weight of truth fades from view.<sup>1</sup> When truth is equated with just what I think is accurate/

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Rev'd Professor Brian Douglas for sharing with me a paper he has prepared for publication in which he discusses ontological and epistemological approaches to truth and their relevance for sacramental theology.

correct/certain/verifiable knowledge we lose our moorings to the truth which is before us. The truth that inheres in the being of a people as such is invisible through an epistemological lens.

**3. The challenges that arise from an epistemological approach to truth are exacerbated in an environment where the individual becomes the locus of authority and determiner of truth.**

We are at the headwaters of the European Enlightenment and the familiar 'turn to the subject'. Immanuel Kant's famous little essay on *What is Enlightenment?* proposed that human beings needed to shed the hitherto powerful forces of external authorities and grow up into adulthood; they needed to assume their own authority. This was a move from external to internal authority and this represented an important development in the rise of the modern philosophy of the self. So here we have two fundamental features of the modern quest for truth. First it is driven by an epistemological concern for new knowledge about all manner of stuff which incidentally is associated with more virulent forms of scepticism because there's a lot of stuff about which we can't be certain about (if you don't know vote no). Second it takes place within the framework of the self-authenticating individual. What is sacrificed are the ontological foundations for truth wherein truth is regarded as proportion between things/being and the mind. That is, truth is what emerges in the dynamic interplay between that property which inheres in being/things/people and personal/mental reflection. As Catherine Pickstock points out, truth is found in the 'proportion between things and mind. Truth is fundamentally a participatory knowledge and it is mediated through signs/persons/communities. What this means minimally is that the question of truth in

the more general everyday activities of life and societal interactions has two aspects: the ‘what’ and the ‘who’. The ‘what’ corresponds to the epistemological concern for accurate knowledge; the ‘who’ corresponds to the ontological concern for the truth of beings in relation to one another.

#### ***4. From truth to power: Jesus before Pilate***

When we abandon the truth as it pertains to a property of human beings (ontology) and settle for some notion of the human being as self-enclosed constructor of truth, the result is love of self before all else (epistemology within the authority of the individual). The individual becomes the ultimate criterion for truth. At this point love of truth has been displaced by the exercise of power. The primary victim is truth itself.

The distinction between truth as knowledge and truth as relationship is brought out powerfully in the interaction between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, following Jesus’ arrest.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, Pilate asked him ‘What is truth?’ (John 18:37-38 NRSV. Those who listen to Jesus’ voice and follow in his way belong to the truth as they enter into relationship with him. In John’s Gospel the witness of Jesus to truth can only be grasped by those related to Jesus and his truth and who come to its light.<sup>3</sup> Grasping the truth is about being in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Truth then is more than a set of ideas or factual knowledge, even though Pilate by his question was seeking an objective definition of truth and imagining that such an objective definition was possible. Rather, truth is a participation in the divine life of God and the incarnate Christ in an

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<sup>2</sup> In what follows I am drawing upon as yet unpublished paper by Rev’d Professor, Brian Douglas.

<sup>3</sup> See John 3:21. ‘But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

ontological sense which involves the subjective nature of relationship. Jesus is not speaking of truth in the abstract or as the distinction between what is correct or false, but specifically in relation to his own presence and being in the incarnation,<sup>4</sup> and the way that those who listen to him belong to and are sanctified in that truth in relationship with him. Pilate does not see this and can only pose an abstract epistemological question of the mind, ‘What is truth?’, guessed at in that moment and seeking an objective answer.

Pilate’s attempt to evade Jesus’ witness ‘suggests that he does not see or belong to this truth, standing right in front of him, and that for him entering into relationship with Jesus was not ontologically possible, but a matter of objective encounter in which he sought the answer to a question so that he would have the knowledge of it. For him there was no connection between the truth of the incarnate Christ, standing before him as a material being (thing), and the mind. For Pilate there was no proportion between things and mind in his search for truth. He merely wrestled with the abstract notion of truth in his mind and so utters his sceptical question as a worldly person alone, employing an epistemological approach. David Ford helpfully observes that focussing on Pilate’s motives in asking this question about truth is the wrong way to go. He suggests that it is ‘better to notice how this question works in the context.’<sup>5</sup> For Ford, in discussing the drama of the trial, the moment does not lead to any exposition in line with the truth that Jesus is. Ford observes that ‘the irony is that Pilate, faced with “the truth” in person, is asking a “what” instead of

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<sup>4</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 36 (Second Edition) John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 331.

<sup>5</sup> David Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021), 366.

a “who” question’ and so for the Christian reader the right question is really ‘Who is truth?’<sup>6</sup>

As the narrative indicates Pilate is affronted that Jesus refuses to attend to him, for Pilate’s words do not accord with the truth. Pilate shifts the ground of the exchange to a matter of power. ‘Don’t you realize I have power either to free or crucify you?’ (John 19:10). Pilate does not need to be attentive to anyone: power is its own justification, listening contributes nothing. Love of truth has been abandoned; the will to power is all that is left. Pilate’s concern is with abstractions, correct knowledge of which he cares little about. He remains blind to the ‘who’ question.

The Pilate/Jesus engagement over truth reveals a dynamic constantly repeated in human history. In the context of the Voice of Parliament there are a plethora of Pilates who have no interest in regard for the being of First Peoples as such. Their interests are elsewhere and their concern for truth is threadbare if not wilfully blind.

##### **5. A Voice to Parliament: uncovering the desires that drive the choices and justifications.**

I’ve always found the 16<sup>th</sup> century English Reformer, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s words extremely helpful: *what heart loves, the will chooses, the mind justifies*. I’ve read quite a deal from the Yes and No advocates. Michael Jensen offered 5 reasons why Christians should vote Yes. It is an interesting example of justifications for Yes that are theologically grounded and balanced (sometimes too balanced to my mind and illustrate the poverty of what one commentator on American politics criticised as the fallacy of ‘both-sidesism’). In response to Jensen a journalist and writer Jeffrey James

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<sup>6</sup> Ford, *The Gospel of John*, 366.



offered 5 reasons why Christians should vote No. The more I considered Jeffrey's piece the more I concluded that he had managed to give 5 reasons why everyone should vote No. His biblical material provided a convenient front for well-honed prejudices. At the level of justifications offered in public discourse (I hesitate to call it debate) there are no end of reasons trotted out for and against, together with and claim and counter claim. At this level we are subjected to myriad alternative facts and truths, misinformation, disinformation, downright lies, exaggerated claims, and multiple gotcha moments in the social and political media frenzy.

I recently came across an article in *Pearls and Irritations* on 'The Cost of Lies: radical honesty has never been more urgent'. In it the author quoted from the Soviet nuclear engineer, Valery Legasov on the consequences of deceit and denial: 'Every lie owes a debt to the truth, sooner or later that debt is paid'. The author's point was not that we might mistake lies for truth but rather 'if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognise truth at all'. She concluded that 'divergence from the truth is not merely a moral failing; it's a strategic one. There's an inverse relationship between reform, renewal, and radical honesty on one hand, and complacency, decay, and lies on the other.....When empires commit to virtues of reform and honesty, they adapt and thrive. When they indulge in the vices of complacency and deceit they stagnate and decline'.

In this same vein I was struck by Lee Rainie Director, The Pew Research Centre's Internet and Technology Project. He observed:

"A key tactic of the new anti-truthers is not so much to get people to believe in false information," Rainie says, "it's to create enough doubt that people will give up trying to find the truth, and distrust the institutions trying to

give them the truth.” He credits Stanford University history of technology professor Robert Proctor with naming the concept: “agnotology” (combining the Greek *agnos* or “not knowing,” with *logy*, “the science of”), which describes intentionally induced doubt and ignorance, through which people who try to learn more about a subject only become more uncertain and distrustful.

What are we to make of the justifications for Yes and No? It’s a mixed bag at best and frankly it masks deeper realities regarding choices made and the desires that drive the rhetoric. As Cranmer noted, what the mind justifies, the will has already chosen. A Yes or a No has already been chosen by those justifying their decisions. Judgements have to be made as to the cogency of the justifications to support either a Yes or a No. And that is extremely perilous at best given the power of social media and the interests that control it.

Back one step further, what the heart loves (desires), the will chooses. It seems to me that this is the region of the personal, social and corporate psyche. Such desires often remain intentionally camouflaged? What then are the desires that drive choices and generate justifications in the public space? For some the desires are clearly manifest. Reconciliation and a hope for something new is palpable among the Yes advocates. For some progressive No advocates, the issue of an uncompromised sovereignty and sense of Indigenous identity symbolised by Treaty is a powerful driver (though to my mind politically naïve); and underlying this is a history and memory of hurt, violence and continuing grievance.<sup>7</sup> The interests of others are various: political power and strategic positioning; the economic

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<sup>7</sup> So not so much a *reconciliation* but a *reckoning* underpinned by fundamental distrust of governments and claim for sovereignty.

interests of extractive capitalism e.g. in relation to access to mineral resources in remote areas of Australia for future energy requirements. And we ought never discount personal ego and ambition driving an individual's self promotion. A desire for security in uncertain times and fear of loss of freedom provides the ideal conditions for generating resentments, conspiracy theories, misinformation and general negativity.<sup>8</sup> Primal fears easily override the higher functioning reasoning and decision making. When these insecurities and fears prevail history, law, the Australian Constitution, justice and Makarrata are either ignored or made light of.

When fear of loss of something real or imagined drives desire and resentments and negativity towards those in need is promoted, then the normal default is to sacrifice whatever appears to threaten perceived loss. Sacrificing others is a primal response to fear. Mercy giving is a higher order functioning frontal operation. In the referendum the focus of NO has been on perceived loss of unity/property/power-truncated and concern that people will, in some unknown way be diminished. The being of the other remains ignored, blurred or rejected.

#### **6. The Referendum is about the being of First Nation People; the truth of who they are in this country**

It is remarkable how the reality, history and personhood of First Nations People have not been properly attended to or shunted around for convenience sake in the public discourse/debate/discussion leading up to

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<sup>8</sup> In a lead article published on the front page of The Saturday Paper on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September, Rick Morton discussed the people who were planning to vote against the Voice. He remarked that focus groups conducted late last year revealed what he called 'a shocking hurdle' blocking the path of the yes vote. Almost a third 'of all participants believed First Nations people had been treated fairly. Not just now, but since invasion.'

the Referendum. As a people their being is before us; the truth of their ancient and resilient culture and life endures notwithstanding attempts over European history to render such culture and peoples invisible or non-existent. The truth about the Voice to Parliament is that it gives voice to the truth of their lives and aspirations. They are the truth tellers of their story; they constitute the true voice. They are the 'who' before the 'what' of the Referendum. But this fundamental aspect of their being as such is continually rendered null and void. Who cares about the 'who of truth' in an environment driven by self-interest, fear and insecurity and strategic moves to gain political advantage and power.

I recalled the beautiful exhortation of the Apostle Paul to the Church at Philippi (4:8):

Finally, brothers and sisters,

whatever is true,

whatever is honourable,

whatever is just,

whatever is pure,

whatever is pleasing,

whatever is commendable,

if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

### **The Uluru Statement**

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a *spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty.* It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is *the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children

will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle*. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.