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TASMANIA

Invasion Day Speech

Professor Rufus Black,

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I acknowledge with profound respect that we gather today on Aboriginal land - the lands of muwinina people. I pay my respects to the many elders here. All that I have to say here today is really an extended acknowledgement. I feel deeply privileged to be able to offer it as a white man at this gathering.

I am here today not because it is a politically correct place to be. Not because I don't value the Western culture of which I'm a product. Not because I don't love Australia.

I am here because, in the end, a nation can only be founded securely on a true telling of its history, and celebrations that embody values that unite us rather than those that divide us.

And if that is to happen, we need to keep momentum in the national conversation about this day.

I know it is a deeply uncomfortable conversation. We have to talk about troubling truths in our national narrative. But one of the other truths that make this a special country is that we cherish the freedom respectfully to have these most difficult of discussions.

The troubling truth with which we need to begin is that the formal proclamation of British sovereignty on 26 January 1788 was also a formal proclamation of invasion. It was the moment when the intent to dispossess

without treaty or agreement was made legally and administratively unambiguous.

Integral to that dispossession was the immoral and illegal use of force. We know all too well here in lutruwita/Tasmania that the attempt to take country from Aboriginal people and impose on it a Western concept of property was resisted by force.

In turn that resistance was met with military action. Here and in other places around the country citizens and the constabulary backed their dispossession with firearms, force and even poison. The scale and nature of that violence descended into the moral darkness of massacres - events which stain our national soil and soul with blood.

In time, invasion became a central part of genocide. When you stand on land, as we do today, where there are no living descendants of the people who cared for this country for tens of thousands of years, it is hard to find another word.

There are those who contest the use of the words of invasion and genocide almost as though that might reduce the gravity of what occurred. But perhaps the reverse is true. The systematic multi-generational dispossession of an entire continent by force, policy, economics and disease - taking it from the world's oldest continuous culture - seems to be a wrong in a category all of its own.

We need to remember that in the 20th century the world had to invent the word 'genocide' to describe what Churchill had called 'crimes without a name'. I do wonder when we look around the world at the similar wrongs done to indigenous peoples in many lands whether we still confront a 'crime without a name'.

If we are to be a nation truly founded, we have to give an accurate name and have an honest accounting of what occurred.

Then we have to find a way forward.

I think a clue lies back on that day in the Western reckoning of time of 26 January 1788 and in that proclamation of sovereignty. We need to recognise this claim was made out of an understanding of the concepts of law, land and

property which belong to a particular civilisation. I think contrary to that is what the High Court concluded in the Mabo Case. It concluded that the understanding of this particular civilisation and the acts that followed did not take anything away from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples. They have a completely different system of knowledge and understanding of the relationships between people, country, and what we might crudely translate as law. To impose by force one understanding of the land does not remove the existence of the other understanding or the relationships created by it.

What we have is two whole systems of knowledge and relationship to country/land sitting side-by-side. We have two realities, two worlds. Where we have two equal coexisting systems, we cannot build a future based on one system, one understanding.

This is especially so where the best that one system can do is to give the original owners of the land rights based on what slipped through the history of invasion and dispossession. That serves to build our future on the wrongs of the past. It is to fail to honour a civilisation and system of knowledge of countless generations. And more than ever, the future of this continent depends on the honouring of that knowledge. These are the people who lived on this continent without empire or ecological collapse. Recent days have reminded us that they knew how to make fire their servant, to care for country, not an enemy that destroyed it. How many lessons we have to learn.

Where there are two such completely different civilisational systems, neither reducible to the other, both occupying the same space, the only way forward is a treaty. Together we need to create a new understanding, a new imagining, about how we have two systems in one place.

We can anticipate how hard that will be: the ambitions, the hopes, the tears, the anger, the disappointments, the breakdowns, the make-ups and the moments of magic when we break the bonds of the past, and we build from the future back. I have confidence that we would finally fashion something worthy of the best of the histories and the hopes of all those involved.

When the treaty was signed and sealed with ceremonies, it would be our 4th of July: our declaration of the interdependence, of the kind of nation we had chosen to be. Our national day.

We would join our cousins in Aotearoa/New Zealand across the waters. They used to celebrate the founding of a colony on 29 January, the date on which William Hobson arrived in the Bay of Islands to issue the proclamation of his appointment. Today their national day is Waitangi Day, 6 February, the day when Maori signed the Waitangi Treaty with the British.

Such a treaty and a day would not just unite two worlds. It would provide us with a day where belonging in Australia was about whether you believed in a grand idea. Not about when you arrived.

It would honour values we have chosen, not celebrate our role as a location for someone else's penal colony.

It would celebrate a national moment, not the story of a single state. As a nation, we would become not just a Federation of States, but a Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well.

I know that some will say this day lies well in the future, but for the sake of the health of the soul of our nation, we need to hasten that day.