

Before I begin, I'd just like to give thanks to Shannon for a beautiful Welcome to Country, to 2ZaCrowd for the wonderful performance, to Aunty Colleen for that very moving tribute. I'd like to pay my respects to Celuia, Jesse, Eddie and Melita. It's so humbling to be invited to deliver an oration of this significance, and honour the life of Eddie Koiki Mabo here tonight. I'd also like to pay my respects to all mob – I know we've got NT mob, we've got Torres Strait Islander mob, myself I'm a Gamilaroi man – so everyone who's here and who made the effort to be here tonight, I'd just like to say thank you. I was told the theme broadly for tonight's talk was going to be about human rights. But I'm going to take a little bit of a different tack, because what I want to talk about tonight is Indigenous rights, and they're not too distinct, but they are special. They are important. And I think tonight of all nights, on Mabo Day, it's important for us to remember our rights as Indigenous peoples. The legacy of Mabo is so hard for me to define. I've been thinking a lot about this and very mindfully. To do that, with his family here tonight – there is the myth, the legend that Mabo has become, that speaks to so many of us, but I think it's also important to remember that all of these people we talk about who have achieved so much, are people: they have families, they went home, they went to bed, they worked, they fought, they struggled for this perseverance, for this success for all of us. But of all the people I think back on, and all that mob have achieved in the past, defeating the myth of Terra Nullius – I can't think of a greater gift to Australia, and particularly to Indigenous people. He fought for his truth, a truth that he never lost sight of, and the truth that belongs to all Indigenous peoples, a very simple, but very profound truth: that this is our land. We are the sovereign peoples of this land. Our sovereignty was never ceded. That truth. So many of our Indigenous rights are wound up within that one simple truth. But just as that flag was planted in the soil to declare Australia as Terra Nullius, so too was the myth of Terra Nullius planted within the national story of Australia, within the psyche of all Australians. That core myth of Terra Nullius led to every other myth that has plagued Indigenous peoples, and every misdeed that has grown from that: the myth that we were hunters and gatherers, that we were primitive peoples, that we had no science, no agriculture, that we did not care for our children. These myths justified not just our dispossession, but also our control, and our regulation. And these myths were essential for Australia to paint itself as a country that was settled. Stories of explorers and adventurers, of battling farmers conquering the land. But it really wasn't acknowledged that people had to be removed from that land in order for those farms, for those cities, for those towns to be built. Those stereotypes, those myths, those – if we're speaking plainly, and I think it's important we do tonight, those lies – have led to every single thing you can think of that has been done to Indigenous people. And yet throughout all of those, the one thing that we have held on to more than anything else is our truth. And it is not just our truth, it is the truth. That truth, that we know who we are. Because when we look across the impact of colonisation on all Indigenous people around Australia, it's hard to pinpoint because we've all had such different experiences. That process from 1770 and through 1788 throughout the rest of the country – some mob didn't see a whitefella til 100 years later. Some people had very different interactions with white people they encountered, with the missionaries they encountered, and so it's hard to try and sum that up within any one group. But at some of the core of those impacts were the idea that we did not deserve the land, that we could not be trusted to manage our own affairs. The stolen generations, the massacres – these were not seen as horrible acts. A lot of the time they were seen as acts of generosity, which is hard for me to even get my head around. But it's important to remember that that truth that we need to speak goes against the grain of how Australia wants to see itself and the core – when people talk about reconciliation, and we're just on the back of Reconciliation Week... I always struggle with that idea, not because I'm in any way opposed to the idea that people should get along, that we have to coexist and that we have to live together, but for me it's simply because it's not a word that really is in my vocabulary for 51 weeks of the year. It's that one week of the year when people say 'What are your thoughts about reconciliation?' I don't really think about it until someone asks me about it. And then it's like 'well, why do you oppose reconciliation?' I don't. I just don't want to push for reconciliation. It's just not what I'm fighting for. What I'm fighting for is the empowerment of Indigenous people, for the advancement of Indigenous people, for the reclaiming of our core truths and our right to speak them. So too often, when we talk about Indigenous rights, our rights as Indigenous people, we're dismissed, out of hand. 'Oh, you want something for free. You want that handout, you want special treatment.' It's like, well being the Indigenous people of this land is special. Why is it wrong to ask for recognition of that specialness without being made to feel guilty? To feel ashamed for it? And as much as, defeating that myth of Terra Nullius was so celebrated, a lot of us – I was fairly young when this happened but I still remember it so profoundly – right off the back of it, were more myths. 'They're going to come and claim your backyard.' 'They're going to come and take your farm.' And that idea has been so intrinsic to holding back Indigenous advancement, Indigenous rights – the idea that for us to have that recognition, for us to have social, cultural, economic opportunities and development, has to come at a cost. It has to come at a loss to non-Indigenous Australia. But one thing that I know, that so many people who are a part of that movement are fighting to defeat the myth of Terra Nullius knew, is that it has not just been a negative impact on us, but it's been a negative impact on non-Indigenous people as well, on the foundation of white Australia. That inability to see us for who we are, has come at a cost as well, of the humanity of this nation. It has been a thorn in the side of the tales of the fair go, of a meritocracy, of a land where – what is it? – if you have a go you get a go. And that takes its toll on non Indigenous Australia as well. So when we talk about the power of healing, even though so much of it – and we hear endlessly of the negative impacts on Indigenous people – there are negative impacts on the rest of the country as well. And this country will never be able to be what it could be until it addresses this. That core truth. So often we're steered away from having those conversations, from having that recognition, from having the opportunity to inform, to celebrate – and that's something I've dedicated a lot of my life to, through work with IndigenousX. I mean it's nothing overly profound – and I got a lovely little intro, someone's really done their research of all the different things I've done, but basically that really impressive sounding list of things that I've done, is really – I was a teacher. I was a primary teacher. And in speaking my truth, and in wanting to stand up for the rights of Indigenous kids in that school, to stand up against inappropriate or racist comments that I would encounter, I found that I felt incapable of being able to remain in teaching. And when you do a teaching degree, you do it to be a teacher – it's not a stepping stone degree that gets you to a bunch of other things. Maybe to become a principal one day if you're lucky, but I never aspired to that. I wanted to teach kids. That's what I spent four years of uni to do, then only three years in the classroom actually doing. So that impressive list of jobs is actually just me needing to make a dollar wherever I could, and working out exactly what it was I wanted to do and what I would be able to do. And very luckily, I stumbled across – not an original idea, but the idea that a platform I had built online, I could share with other Indigenous peoples, that there would be strength in diversity, and as was mentioned in my introduction, I would talk a lot about misrepresentation in the media and the damage that that misrepresentation carries with it. And so part of it was that I would talk a lot about the need for diverse Indigenous voices – right or wrong, good or bad, educated or flash or not, just – we needed to be humanised, and we needed to do that on our own terms. So when people ask 'where did you get the idea, to come up with IndigenousX?', well, the idea that I had something that was more than I needed for myself and sharing it with other mob is not an original idea, I can't really take credit for that one. But I'm really glad that I did it. Over the seven years since we started that we've had hundreds of hosts, who've come to tell their own truths. To talk about the different myths that affect Indigenous people. But a lot of people don't talk about that. They might just be a single mum, raising kids. They might be a teacher. They might be a lawyer. They might be anyone and everyone. Because when you think about that now – it's more and more common, in the last five years particularly, to open a newspaper and read an article from an Indigenous person, telling their story. But it wasn't that long ago that if you read an opinion piece in Australia, it was probably in The Australian, and it was probably by one of five people. And now through IndigenousX we've now had hundreds of people, and we've been able to beat another myth: the myth that Australia didn't want to hear from Indigenous people – they might be interested in hearing about Indigenous people, but they didn't want to hear from Indigenous people. The only people who want to do that is other Indigenous people, and as 3% of the nation that's not a really big audience, so we're not going to cater to that. But we've been able to grow a community of people who have said, 'we want to hear it. We might not agree with it, but it's important that we know it, that we see that truth.' And that, more than anything else I will ever achieve in my life, apart from being a husband and father, but my impact, my legacy, is simply that: that we can tell our own stories. That our stories matter. And you can't talk about Indigenous rights, Indigenous empowerment, Indigenous excellence – which is what the x stands for – without acknowledging the backdrop against which that sits, and that is that when the phrase 'Indigenous excellence' was coined, for many people that didn't exist. It was almost oxymoronical. All those words didn't go together. We talk about Indigenous deficits, Indigenous disadvantage, Indigenous imprisonment, Indigenous over-representation in incarceration, whatever it may be. But we didn't always talk about those strengths. And we didn't talk about why those strengths hadn't been seen and hadn't been recognised. And a big part of that, from my perspective, in navigating these spaces, working in education and media – and thankfully through starting IndigenousX I now get to work in health, I get to work in any number of areas – is that white Australia has not allowed us to have that excellence and to claim that excellence, because to recognise that challenges those myths that grew from Terra Nullius. So, every framing of Indigenous people needs to be one that reinforces the idea that we need charity, that we need reconciliation as a gift to us, that every policy every act that's being done is done purely with our best interests at heart, but it simply takes that long to civilise the savage. And so every failure of government policy gets pushed through that lens. And every rejection of those myths from Indigenous people gets pulled into 'well, you just need to get over the past, you just need to move on, you need to take responsibility for yourselves.' I think if any group have taken on more responsibility for the history of Australia, it's us. We take the responsibility for reconciliation, we take the responsibility for healing, we take the responsibility for not just looking after our families but for educating non-Indigenous Australia as well. And that emotional load can be crushing at times. It can be amazingly rewarding at other times, but it can be relentless. I remember when the documentary First Contact came out, and they had a group of whitefellas travel around to different Indigenous communities, and there was a stat that came out from Reconciliation Australia that said 'did you know that six out of 10 white Australians have never met an Indigenous person?' And I thought, 'and?' I haven't met a lot of people here tonight but I still know that you are human. I know that you have human rights. I know that you deserve respect and fair treatment. We don't need to have met each other for this to happen. And as I wrote quite cheekily at the time, I thought for whitefellas and us all to meet, that's a full time job. That's a lot of work! But that's that expectation, that we have to prove our worth, and we have to prove we deserve our rights. When we've had opportunities, limited though they may be – like ATSIC. ATSIC was never set up to really achieve what it's now blamed for failing to achieve. It was never really given the capacity to do that but when it was wound up John Howard at the time said, 'this is the failed experiment of self-determination. We've given Indigenous people a go, they've stuffed it up, they can't be trusted. We'll take it back and we'll take it from here, thank you very much.' But it isn't something that we need to prove. Our right to self-determination is inalienable. We have a right to control our own destinies. We have a right to maintain our connections to land, and to water. For those people who have lost those or losing those, we have a right to rebuild them. We have a right to rebuild our languages, to maintain the ones that luckily are still thriving. We have a right to our families, to our children. These aren't things that you should need to prove you're capable of. These are things that should be given. And so much of our time, so much of our energy, is wound up in what effectively boils down to 'hey, did you know if you cut us we bleed? Did you know that we care for our children? That we love our land?' When we had the footy players who stood up recently and said 'I don't want to sing, that anthem really doesn't represent me,' they got 'Why do you hate this country so much?' We love this country. Not the nation state colony bit, but this land, this country, we love it. And to have that pulled into question, you have to start to in turn question what kind of myths we have that can be so common within white Australia that you can actually write an article saying 'these people need to leave the country if they don't love it.' And not just that, but a country that's actually doing that. We're having High Court battles, we're saying, 'is it okay to deport Indigenous people if they've got dual citizenship somewhere else?' That's that's a real question that we're actually answering as a nation right now. And a lot of the tests that are being put in front of us, we are failing. And a big part of that for me is coming back to those core truths. What we need to keep sight on, what conversations we need to be having. Where is that space for the national narrative? What are those things that are going to move us forward? Just recently we saw – I think this was through the ABC – when are we going to have an Indigenous PM? That to me is the wrong question. It'll happen. We'll have one. And I really pity that fella, because they're gonna have a really hard time. Because if you want to be the first Indigenous PM, maybe like hold on a minute. Maybe be the third or fourth. You don't want to be that first one. But the reality is having an Indigenous person at the top of broken systems that fail Indigenous people is not necessarily going to fix those broken systems. We need to look at what in those systems is broken and how do we address it. We don't need to look at individual advancement as signifiers of Indigenous growth and empowerment collectively because, unfortunately, all too often, and I know a lot of us who have succeeded or who hold up those heroes, often get met with, 'well they did it, so why can't you?' If they were able to overcome that, that oppression, that system, that racism, and were able to succeed – well, then if you didn't do that, that's on you. That's not on the system that failed you, that's your individual failing. But when you've got that giant tuna net, you're going to catch a lot of tuna no matter what you do. There might be one or two to get out. You don't point at the rest and go 'well that's on you.' Because that net was made to catch those tuna, and very much our systems were not made for us to succeed within. Our systems, for the most part, were built around the very premise that we don't belong in them. It was there in the laws that explicitly said, 'you're not allowed to go to this school,' 'you're not allowed to live in this town,' 'you're not allowed to swim in that swimming pool.' A lot of those laws have been removed. But we haven't gone so far as to put in more to ensure that we have to be given equitable treatment within the law, that we have to be given respect, that we have to have access to our own ways of being and doing within the system. Now all too often I work with different organisations who want a Reconciliation Action Plan, because that's all the rage at the moment – has been for a little bit now. And under their Indigenous employment bit they'll go 'we've got the space for two Indigenous trainees we're going to bring in. And we're hoping that they can help us decolonise our institution.' And I've – particularly when I started out with my work a lot of it was in education – so I'd ask, 'well, why don't you go hire an Indigenous principal?' We got them. Why don't we get an Indigenous minister? We got them too. Why don't we get – I don't know, those two 18 year olds, the pressures that you feel... We want you to decolonise our space and make it better for Aboriginal people, but we don't want you to talk about racism. We don't want you to get too ahead of yourself. We don't want you to speak out of turn. We don't want you to expect promotion. But we do want you to organise a morning tea, and if we could get an Elder in to do a welcome... And they want to be paid? What? That's crazy talk! That work, these processes, are not going to bring about those outcomes that we know we need to achieve. And so, for me, when I think about those core truths and how they're going to help us achieve those core outcomes. I've got that truth here and I've got that outcome here and that pathway in the middle. It can seem a bit elusive, it can seem a bit – a bit smoky, it's like trying to look in the back of the crowd with these very very bright lights shining down on me. I can't quite see it all. But the one thing I do know is the moment that we let go of those truths, we're never going to achieve those goals because those truths are those goals. The moment we let go of those truths of who we are and what are our rights as Indigenous peoples, the moment that we accept the idea that closing the gap is the outcome, rather than an obvious – people ask why I don't want to close the gap. I'm not saying I don't want to close the gap. I want to live, I don't oppose closing the gap. It's just that's not the end goal. That does nothing to recognise the rights of Indigenous people as Indigenous peoples. And where, for me, Indigenous rights and human rights are not separate categories removed, is that after 230 years of the colony failing to give Indigenous peoples our human rights, the best way to achieve them in my mind is through a process of Indigenous rights, of self-determination, of control of our own systems, not just self-determination for our peak bodies to set policy and practice – although that is essentially and fundamentally important as well – but the self-determination for our peoples to determine our status as Indigenous peoples within the colony, to determine our racial relationship within the colony, or without the colony, and I don't know what the outcomes of self-determination will be. And to me that's that point again when people say 'you've got to prove it, you got to fight for it, what are you gonna do if you get it?' That's for us to decide and in that journey, in that process, we might make mistakes. Looking at the rest of our government, or looking at any government around the world, it seems that it's fair to say mistakes are probably likely to be made along the way – and that's okay, that's how you learn. Now whatever mistakes they may or may not have been within ATSIC – which I certainly don't think was as significant as what they say today – you don't just abolish that and move on. If we did that every time the government made a mistake we would have never had a government. But keeping those core truths, and in turn passing that on to our children, even if we're laughed at, even if we're ridiculed, even if we're put down as wanting something for free, for wanting special treatment – not being ashamed to say 'yes I want special treatment,' because it's special to be Indigenous. It's not better or worse, I'm not talking superior or inferior peoples. I'm talking, being Indigenous is special. And it's not a threat to the colony. It's a fact. It's a core truth. It is our truth. And our truth should not be seen as – what I dream of is not our truth being our truth, just being truth. Of course, we have those rights. That's all I can hope for, for my own legacy. I don't dream that I will ever achieve a Mabo moment in my lifetime. I don't aspire to. But what that legacy I hope inspires is that my children will grow up and say, 'here's a man who spoke truth. For better or worse, whenever he did or did not do. He spoke what he believed is true.' And I hope it inspires in them to pursue their own truths, to not listen to those people who tell them that two plus two equals five, but to hold on to that knowledge of what they know of who they are and where we need to be. Hopefully they'll do a better job than me and they'll know exactly how to do it, because I don't know exactly how we're going to do it. I still don't know how we're gonna – you know, if it's gonna be treaty, I don't know if it's gonna be the Uluru Statement, I don't know if it's gonna be an Indigenous PM – but I do know that if we lose sight of our goals, if we lose sight of our truth, that's when we get swept up in the wrong direction. And that's where we don't know where we need to go. That's where we don't know who we are and what we are. And that, to me, more than any other horrendous – and some of the things are horrendous – but the other things that Indigenous peoples face, nothing, to me, could ever be worse than the idea of losing our sense of who we are. Because we are Indigenous. This is our land, our sovereignty was never ceded. Native Title is not land rights. Reconciliation is not justice. And these are the conversations we need to have.



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