

# 2019 Mabo Oration

**Delivered by Luke Pearson, CEO and Founder, IndigenousX.**

**Filmed at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Brisbane, on 3 June 2019.**

The Mabo Oration is a biennial event organised by the Queensland Human Rights Commission in partnership with QPAC, and is part of the Commission's public commitment to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Queensland.

It celebrates and pays tribute to Eddie Mabo and the landmark High Court decision which legally recognised that Indigenous people had a special relationship to the land that existed prior to colonisation.

More information on the Oration is available on the Commission website at [qhrc.qld.gov.au](http://qhrc.qld.gov.au).

**SCOTT MCDUGALL, QUEENSLAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONER:** Good evening. My name is Scott McDougall, and on behalf of the Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland and the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, welcome to the 2019 Mabo Oration. I'm sure, like me, you're looking forward to hearing from our guest Luke Pearson, who after delivering his oration will be joined by ABC Radio journalist Rhianna Patrick for a question and answer session before we finish up this evening with some more entertainment from local Indigenous outfit The Ancient Bloods.

We have a fantastic turnout tonight. And as we're all assembled here on the traditional lands of the Jagera and Turrbal people, I'd like to pay my respect to all of their descendants in the audience tonight, and their Jagera and Turrbal ancestors, present day Elders, and Elders of the future.

There are a number of other people in the audience I'd like to acknowledge and thank. Firstly the Mabo family. We are immensely proud to have our association with the Mabo family in hosting this event. And thanks and whereabouts are you? There's Celuia, Melita, Jesse and Edward - I thought I had cute children, but some of the cutest children on the planet belong in that family. It is an absolute honour for us to continue this association with your family. We really appreciate it and cherish it.

There are a number of other people in the audience I feel that we also need to acknowledge, and they include the chair of QPAC Board of Trustees Professor Peter Coaldrake; Co-Chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and previous Mabo Orator Les Malezer; President of the Land Court, Her Honour Fleur Kingham; Director General, Department of Environment and Science, Mr Jamie Merrick; Director General, Department of Transport and Main Roads, Mr Neil Scales; Public Service Commissioner, Mr Rob Setter; Queensland Ombudsman, Mr Phil Clark; Mayor of the Torres Strait Council, Miss Vonda Malone; CEO of Legal Aid Queensland, Mr Anthony Reilly; CEO of QCOSS, Mr Mark Henley; and finally, University of Queensland Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous engagement) Professor Bronwyn Fredericks. There are many what I would describe as VIPs and CIPS - and that's Culturally Important People in this room tonight, so I welcome you all. I now call upon QPAC Elder in

residence, Aunty Colleen Wall, who is going to pay tribute to lay this is to delight Mrs Bonita Mabo.

**AUNTY COLLEEN WALL, QPAC ELDER IN RESIDENCE:** I'm very honoured to stand here tonight and honour Aunty Bonita. She's been a star in my life for about eight years now. As chair of Queensland South Native Title Services I've met her at nearly all in the Native Title conferences and had a chat. And the Commission's asked me to deliver the tribute tonight. And I'm most honoured to do that for the commission as well. Mrs Mabo was born in Halifax Queensland in 1943, and was one of 10 children. She was an Australian South Sea Islander, a Vanuatu descendant, whose ancestors were taken to work in the sugarcane industry in Queensland. My family has South Sea Islander - I am a South Sea Islander descendant as well, so I really honour what she's done for our community.

Bonita married Eddie in 1959 and together they raised 10 children, and I honour their family. In 1973 Mr and Mrs Mabo established the black community school in Townsville where children could learn and grow with their own culture. In 2013, Mrs Mabo was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia for distinguished service to the Indigenous community and to human rights as an advocate for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander peoples. In 2018 a star was named in her honour by the Sydney Observatory. In 2018 James Cook University conferred upon Mrs Mabo an Honourary Doctorate of Letters in recognition for her outstanding contribution to social justice and human rights.

Last year I was honoured to attend her state funeral in Townsville where over 1000 people attended to honour her life's work. She's described as a quiet, loving passionate and caring woman with the remarkable ability to speak up and be heard when needed. Mr and Mrs Mabo's contribution and persistence in the fight for social justice and human rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the South Sea Islander community is formidable and tireless. And I must say there that the family has always been behind her.

Tonight's oration represents the Commission's long standing commitment to the memory of Eddie Koiki Mabo, and the significance of the High Court decision that bears his name. That decision legally recognised that Indigenous peoples have a special relationship to the land and waters. It secured traditional title for all future generations. Mrs Mabo has graced this oration with her presence on all but one occasion, when ill health prevented her from attending. And we miss her presence here tonight, but I know she's watching over us. The Commission considers it a privilege to have had a connection with Mrs Mabo, whose strength, integrity and generosity, will long stay with us. As the chair of Queensland South Native Title Services as well as the Elder in Residence here I've valued her graceful presence in our Native Title world, and in our arts and cultural world. She will shine for a long time to come, in our presence. Thank you.

**SCOTT MCDOUGALL, QUEENSLAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONER:** Thank you, Aunty.

Tonight we honour Eddie Mabo and are inspired by his determination to prove to the Australian courts the truth that he had always known: the system of traditional ownership of lands and waters of the Torres Strait. To do this, Eddie Mabo had to walk in two worlds, and

his legacy was in building a foundation for land rights through Native Title. Almost two years ago, that gracious Uluru Statement from the Heart sought the means to constitutional reforms, to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take their rightful place in their own country. It anticipated that 'when we have power over our destiny, our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds, and their culture will be the gift to their country.' But the authors of the Uluru Statement also acknowledge the present day reality is different. Proportionally the most incarcerated people on the planet. Youth languishing in detention in obscene numbers. And they decried 'the torment of our powerlessness'. I believe that in years to come, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull will come to understand and lament the significance of the opportunity that he, on behalf of the people of Australia, was unable to grasp: an opportunity to share power and opportunity for children and culture to flourish.

On Wednesday last week, the newly sworn in Indigenous Affairs Minister Honourable Ken Wyatt became Australia's first Aboriginal person to hold a federal cabinet position. The minister's elevation promises to be a great step forward for our nation. But we can and must move towards structural change, in which power is shared and the opportunities of partnership move from rhetoric to reality, as we wait to see what unfolds with constitutional recognition at the national level. Here in Queensland we've recently seen some groundbreaking development in the recognition and protection of rights. On the 27th of February this year, the Queensland Parliament, through the passage of the Human Rights Act, made a clear declaratory statement about the human rights to be protected under Queensland law. The 23 rights, which include the distinct cultural rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, will be protected from 1 January 2020. On 1 July this year, in just a few weeks' time, so I remind my staff, the Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland will become the Queensland Human Rights Commission. And we will be working hard to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from Tweed Heads to Saibai Island know they have rights - and importantly, how they can exercise and assert them. This is a big job, so I'm hoping many of you in this room will get the Murri grapevine going and help us out.

And now let me introduce you to someone who has invented his own kind of electronic Murri grapevine. Luke Pearson is a Gamilaroi man who founded IndigenousX in 2012. Luke has worked as a teacher, mentor, counsellor, public speaker, collaborator, mediator, facilitator, events manager, researcher, evaluator, reporter, and believe it or not, much more. Luke's passion for IndigenousX stems from his belief in the need to improve Indigenous media representation in Australia, and to have a platform for individuals to tell their own story in their own words. As I mentioned earlier, there'll be a Q&A session at the end of Luke's oration. We're collating the questions via Twitter so if you'd like to ask one, please tweet it using the hashtag #MaboOration. So now, would you please join me in welcoming Luke Pearson to the stage to deliver the 2019 Mabo Oration.

**LUKE PEARSON, FOUNDER AND CEO, INDIGENOUSX:** Thank you Scott for that wonderful introduction.

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 of, 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. And I hope to continue these conversations with some of you mob out there later. Thank you.

## Q&A with Luke Pearson and Rhianna Patrick from ABC

**RHIANNA PATRICK, ABC:** Thank you Luke. I think there's a lot to unpack as you were strolling across the stage - I think the cameramen are really happy you're now in one place. Just a reminder that you can join the conversation if you have a question for Luke, using the Mabo Oration hashtag. You can use it on Twitter or on Facebook, and those will get sent through to me. So, if you do have a question please use that hashtag.

Luke, when you talk about Indigenous rights, I wanted to know: what do you mean exactly by that? If you can articulate that a little bit more, but also why the separation of Indigenous rights from human rights? Why that distinct separation for you?

**LUKE PEARSON:** I think for me the importance of distinguishing the two, and I touched on that a bit or at least I was thinking - I don't know what I actually said, but I was definitely thinking it while I was up there - was that if we focus on human rights, then that's very likely to get left to the systems that currently exist to deliver those. That's going to be handed to the government, as we saw often - say with housing, with clean water, with employment. Whereas when you start talking about Indigenous rights, at the core centre of Indigenous rights is the right to self-determination, and that means we need the capacity to achieve those outcomes for ourselves.

And so for me, why I prefer to talk about Indigenous rights rather than human rights is, in the simplest of terms, that I don't necessarily trust a government to deliver them after however many years it's been since we abolished the protectorate, since we abolished the welfare boards - and even during those times, that was for our betterment. And too many of our statistics we've seen slip backwards. And so you can you can debate whether that's through design or through inability or whatever that may be, but we have a right to achieve those for ourselves and I don't think they can be achieved by anyone else. And so the only way to really centre the role of Indigenous people in Indigenous advancement, is to talk about Indigenous rights.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** So do you believe that we need to rethink human rights in this country? That we need to rethink what that means in the context of particularly First Nations Australians?

**LUKE PEARSON:** Yeah, most definitely. We often talk about the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous people and look at the ways we're failing those, but if you look at the UN Declaration of Human Rights we're failing a lot of those as well. And so I think the status of Indigenous people in many ways represent the health of this nation. Unfortunately we are those canaries in the coal mine, you know if Indigenous people aren't doing well and the country is not doing well, then something is fundamentally wrong with the colony. But it's important when we're looking at the country we acknowledge so many other people who are suffering and who are being denied their human rights as well - so when when we look at the

treatment of unemployed people to people with disabilities to refugees to so many of our immigrant communities. We see those different but similar myths that have been put on them - we're saving people by stopping boats we're 'helping people', now through punitive measures on Centrelink we're encouraging them to get jobs by cutting off their payments or making people live on income that is far below the poverty line. So, I think centering those conversations about Indigenous rights, I would hope if we can make moves in those, we would see advancements in a lot of other areas as well.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** You spoke a lot about truth, tonight, and I want to know how important is truth in 2019 to that narrative that surrounds First Nations Australians?

**LUKE PEARSON:** I think it's fundamental. It's... You can really feel like you're just losing your grip on reality when you engage in so much of the mainstream media and the conversations that are had about us without us, that we're met with in random interactions made online or in person. 'Why do you mob do this? Why do you think that?' We don't think that. That's not things that we say or do. They're just things that other people have said we say or do, you know, through that ignorance or misunderstanding.

A lot of people who believe those myths do so out of ignorance, but I think it's important that we remember that a lot of these myths were not created out of ignorance. They were created quite willingly and willfully.

At the moment we're seeing a resurgence in the push for Indigenous science - Indigenous astronomy, particularly, is going great guns at the moment - and a lot of those records are early whitefella anthropologist and scientist records. They knew that truth. We're not rediscovering it now; that truth was known by very clever people who documented very clearly 'these people have agriculture. They have science and have sophisticated ways of knowing and being and of caring for this land.' And there were conscious will, for decisions that were made to not include those in the national story. And for me, that always comes back to - if we acknowledge those things, then we have to acknowledge that this country was not Terra Nullius. And when we look at those models of white saviour mindset, of that charitable mindset, of like 'we're trying to help these people,' so much of that goes against the grain of when we know the things that people turned a blind eye to, of the myths that were created and perpetuated - and I've completely forgot what your question was, so I'll let you bring it back.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** Well, I mean, you mentioned Indigenous rights. And I suppose Indigenous astronomy is a good example of that, in terms of people kind of dismissing knowledge that is there. And I mean it is something that if you have been on Twitter, something that you have seen is Aboriginal women who happened to be also astrophysicists feeling that pushback of people telling them they don't know what they're talking about. But yet they've trained in the western context and are applying it in a traditional context to what it is that they do. So I mean I suppose my question around the truth in 2019, is how do you continue to push back on that? When you are seeing that sort of thing online and those conversations are still happening where there's this belief, as you mentioned, that we didn't have the science, that we were hunters and gatherers, and we were primitive in some way?

**LUKE PEARSON:** When we're talking about those truths and the work those particular young Indigenous women are doing at the moment, it gets back to like the six out of 10 and how many whitefellas out there who would have liked to try and convince every person that

comes out there that you didn't have science, you didn't have this, you didn't have that - that would be 1000 lifetimes worth of work trying to educate each and every one of those people. Or they could just get on with the work that they're doing, which is amazing and exciting, and let that work stand for itself. And so while we do need people who are trying to educate non-Indigenous people with challenging those myths and stereotypes, we can't get too bogged down in them that we forget to actually just get about doing the work.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** I think when it comes to Twitter a lot of people think it's a cesspit of negativity. But I wanted to kind of ask about, you know, how have you used Twitter in that way? In terms of Indigenous rights, in terms of truth telling, but also in terms of the telling of our stories?

**LUKE PEARSON:** I've been on Twitter a long time - probably too long, but probably a decade or so now - and in the early days there was no thinking about that. We were just saying things that were common sense and that were true. And then a lot of people, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, they will join in those conversations and particularly non-Indigenous groups go 'well I've never thought of that before. I've never heard that. That goes against what I was taught when I was in school or what I see in the media,' and realising there was an appetite for people who wanted to hear that. That's why I always kind of get a bit shame when people are like 'oh you've done these amazing things' and it's like, I just tweet stuff. I just say what I think is obvious.

And yeah, so many people talking about it and saying 'look I've never heard anyone say that before,' it's like, ... I'm saying that rejection of our truth we've been taught not to say a lot of these things in front of white people for professional consequences, for personal consequences, social consequences. So much of that stuff is just kept off the radar of social interactions. And so much of that was kept off the radar in media spaces.

So we only know what's happening in places that we aren't because of what we see through those, you know like, those grapevines that swing around the nation so we always know what other mob are up to. But non-Indigenous Australia had no idea of these very obvious things like people who wouldn't want to sing the anthem and things like that. I don't even know how to begin to explain why people wouldn't want to sing the anthem and in 2019, and they were like 'I didn't know this was a thing' and it's we had that song Anthem in the 90s and it's a great song, you should really just go and listen to that. And it still wasn't new then either. It's like opposition to Invasion Day, to Australia Day. I did an interview, speaking of Twitter, and there was a fella who was all 'the last few years has been a lot of resistance to Australia Day from Indigenous people.' 1938 Day of Mourning. This is nothing new. This is not new. 1888, Henry Parkes, who was the Premier of New South Wales at the time and someone amazing - I'd love to know the story of this journo - they said 'what are you gonna do for the Aboriginal people in in the centenary of Australia In Australia? What's their role?' and the answer was 'why would we do that? We'd just be reminding them that we robbed them.'

It used to be common sense knowledge in Australia that Australia Day was not made for us, or for our benefit; that Australia Day was not something we would want to celebrate. And then in the rewriting of the Australian narrative, somehow, it's seen again as a deficiency in us, that we should. When we say I'm Aboriginal or someone's not Aboriginal, it's 'oh you're being divisive! Why are you trying to make it us and them?' It's not. It's not a bad thing. I'm me and you're you and the two of us are us and they're them and these aren't

confrontational truths. These are just common sense truths, but they're so often framed that we have this maliciousness, and we have this hatred, that we have - you know, it's often framed that I'm a very controversial person and I just - like I'm a pretty happy fella. Well, you know. I don't think what I'm saying is that it's not controversial, or it certainly shouldn't be.

And so that - what I hope that a lot of us are doing through IndigenousX or Indigenous Twitter or through other Indigenous media projects is, we're just making it obvious. We're just making it transparent. We're just bringing to the light those things that for a lot of mobs, even if you disagree with what I'm saying, you know what I'm saying. And it's about that. You don't have to agree with what I'm saying at all. You just shouldn't be so confused and confronted by Indigenous people speaking core truths.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** IndigenousX has been a lot about changing the narrative, and changing the narrative around First Nations Australia. How is that push going, in changing those perspectives, in changing those conversations, in trying to have those conversations in a more open forum?

**LUKE PEARSON:** Well, big thanks to mainstream media - they've given me no shortage of opportunities to talk about things that are wrong with the narrative! People ask 'what's the best way to get someone who's racist to not be racist?' There are so many different ways. If we knew how to cure racism that wouldn't be a problem anymore. We would have fixed that one. But you know, changing that narrative is not always about trying to address that ignorance. A lot of the time it's just about having conversations amongst ourselves but inviting non-Indigenous people to come and listen to them. It's holding up a mirror.

More recently I've started to write a few more sort of overly sarcastic, parody-type articles where - okay so recently there was one in The Australian with all that Kerri-Anne Kennerley stuff when she went on that big rant, and god knows what all that was about, but you know, 'all you mob in Sydney, you need to go to the Northern Territory' and everything else. The Australian ran an article that said, 'Indigenous Leaders Support Kerri-Anne Kennerley', and it was Warren and Ken and Jacinta Price. And they're all people - they're all Liberal Party members, I might add - but beyond whatever you might think of those people as individuals... I'm not necessarily being critical of them, it's the fact that that phrase 'Indigenous leaders' carries with it this idea that we all think the same, that we have a central leadership who can speak on our behalf, and that painting of Indigenous people through that pan-Indigenous lens of when one Indigenous person said something, a dozen other Indigenous people will say 'why did you think that?' They said that. I didn't say that. And so I ran an article, 'White Leaders Oppose Kerri-Anne Kennerley' and only interviewed a few white people.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** What did you find out?

**LUKE PEARSON:** They really opposed Kerri-Anne! And so yeah I can safely say - admittedly, I hand picked them and I wrote their quotes for them and then I asked them if it was okay. And they were very generously on board. Because there comes a time when like I say, you can dedicate your entire life - and people do - to researching the fact that we that we are amazing, that we had amazing things, and it's - while people commit themselves to those journeys because they're fascinated by that knowledge and they want to unpack it, there are entire lifetimes, rather than looking at something new and taking ideas forward, having to be spent unpacking those myths and those lies and those untruths and trying to

heal the damage being done. Scientists going through Western science spaces to prove that Indigenous science is real - and achieving amazing things, but still every day, not just from random internet trolls but from people within their own institutions... We're seeing teachers and academics and scientists and so many people say 'we were real and we had real stuff and that stuff is awesome.' And actually, that really awesome stuff you think you have is kind of destroying our rivers and our land and their farmland, so we might actually want to look at that if we want to have any hope of achieving sustainability in this country.

And the fact that there's so much pushback against that really, you know, you can get angry at it and you can get frustrated and I do, I get cranky about it all the time, but to me - I'm finding a lot of joy in being sarcastic and having the parody articles and having a bit of fun with it. And I'm finding it's actually having a lot of traction with a lot of people just realising it. When I wrote that article about white leaders opposing Kerri-Anne, a lot of the questions I was getting about that one were like 'oh, so you don't like Warren or Jacinta', and no. It's not about them. It's about that we don't have Indigenous leaders. Just say Indigenous people, if you want - or Indigenous Liberal Party members, or ... For some communities, we might have our leaders, but we don't have an Indigenous leader, it's not a thing that exists, and I got tired of trying to explain that. And I thought the best way to do that was to talk about white leaders, and then people say 'wait, that's not a thing, that's not real, that doesn't exist.' It's saying yeah, now you know. That's, that's what we do.

That changing the narrative is really - except there's so much unpacking that needs to be done, but beyond that, you know, in correcting the myths, just telling those stories that never get told. When we have someone that just gets on and talks about something completely random, I love that. Because as Indigenous people, we don't all just want to talk about Indigenous stuff all day. I do it a lot when I'm on stage but that's what I've chosen to do. A lot of the time when we get invited no one's asked me what I think about those other things, so you go into these spaces and you talk about these things. Because I love talking about them, I've studied them, I've research them, I've worked with mob, this is who I am and what I am and what I choose to do. But then when that's all people see, someone else will look at another Aboriginal person and think 'Oh, they're not trying to educate me, they're one of the bad Aborigines; he's one of the good Aborigines,' and then I got to spend time unpacking that.

So, it's the myths that have grown around that seed of Terra Nullius I'm looking at as this infinite bowl of knots we're constantly trying to undo. And if you've ever tried to undo a big ball of knots, it is really infuriating. You've got to find ways of finding joy within that process, of keeping yourself interested and refreshed, because for me, just like we got to keep on to those core truths, we've also got to keep on to our own quality of life.

Before I was a parent and a husband, I was kinda happy just to keep going until I burn out. I worked non-stop all day every day. And I was like, well, this is the hill I'm gonna die on, this is what I'm gonna do for the rest of my life. And, you know, my personal life might sacrifice for it but I'm doing it for what I hope is for a greater good. Realising that me having that that sense of self and that happiness and that connection and spending time on my own cultural journeys, that's worth fighting for too.

You know, to sacrifice yourself for the greater good is not the goal because then, as, as a role model, the legacy you're leaving for other people coming after is 'That's what you should do. That's a good way to spend your life.' And so now I tried to find that balance of - I do

want to change that narrative, I do want to tell those stories, but I don't want to send a message that you have to do that, that you've got to stay in that manic, angry, frustrated space, you can do it in innovative ways, you can do it in fun ways, you can do it in ways that bring other people along with you - not as followers, but as leaders in their own right, on their own journey.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** And when you have an article like that, it must - I mean how do you feel when it does cut through? When it does seem to be starting to change that narrative? When you see people coming on board and supporting more of what IndigenousX does?

**LUKE PEARSON:** As someone who writes pretty prolifically at times - so some articles do quite well and some of them really do not, as is the nature of the art - you know I've learned to just be happy with that. I was tickled with that one, I loved that article, and I thought it would go well, but if it hadn't, I would have still been happy with it because I had fun writing it. It was a joy for me, and then when you get the added bonus of it having a positive impact - you think okay, there's something there that I can work with in that space with the audience. But again, I don't take it as my personal responsibility to try and educate the world or entertain the world, I'm just trying to be true to myself and to have a good life while I'm doing it.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** I'm aware of time so I might just check what we'd like got Twitter-wise, and we did get a question earlier while you were on stage, which was from Dr Sandy O'Sullivan, who asked, 'Why has humour being so important to IndigenousX?'

**LUKE PEARSON:** I think it's one of those things that's just so important to Indigenous people. There's something innately comedic about things that are ludicrous - even when those things are horrible. And so, you know, the idea that it was a peaceful settlement is innately comical because we know how untrue that is, even though the realities that underpin that brutal and horrific. The only natural response to being confronted by something that is just so bafflingly untrue, is to have a laugh at and to just say 'Oh my god.' But that's what we mob do when we come together, we find ways to comfort each other, to find joy in life and I just don't - and again, I don't think that's anything innately special about Indigenous people, I think that's an essential survival mechanism for all people who are confronted with realities that conflict with what they know to be true.

And also, I like a laugh. I like taking the - I couldn't imagine doing it and not having fun with the way that we do it, with no laughing. And I couldn't imagine my life without laughter, even though I said - you know, when I was burning the candles at both ends and I was really not looking after myself and my wellbeing, I would still find ways to find joy in life and in what I was doing, and in ways that I would share those stories and those truths.

And I think, you know, just as jokes, so often - I think for us, we know probably better than most people in Australia how much they can be weaponised against you - they can also be amazing tools of empowerment as well, and laughing at the ignorance of some of those jokes. Everyone would have heard this at some point growing up: what do you call a stick that - a boomerang that doesn't come back? I gave away the punch line.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** What do you what do you call it?

**LUKE PEARSON:** A stick! Then it's like 'nah, that's a killer boomerang, a lot of boomerangs don't come back. That's a number seven. You don't even know! You been here 200 years

and you don't even know boomerangs! It's a one thing you've held up as a symbol!" That joke's not funny, it's just not true. But the truth is funny when you tell it that way. And so you can educate through humour, and for me that's - so much of what I see and what I say is so ludicrous I just don't know what else to do but make a joke of it.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** This one comes, I think, from someone in the Northern Territory: 'What do you think in open and honest voice and achieve for a place like Wadeye?'

**LUKE PEARSON:** That's a great question. I think so much of what goes on in so many of our remote communities, when we talk about the lenses that Indigenous people are perceived through, remote communities cop absolute hell in that space and always have. And you know their truths matter as much as, as anyone else's, and the need for change and the need for self-determination I don't think is... It's just so poignant and powerful there.

So the ability to have those conversations, to say, we're not a charity case, we're not here looking for white saviors, we're actually looking for opportunities to develop our own communities. And I was lucky enough to spend a bit of time up in Wadeye, and we're lucky enough to have mob from there here tonight, and it's very humbling to have them here as a part of this and for IndigenousX to be working with them. But you know when you go there, you see the things that you don't see on TV, that you don't read in the media, and that's just people getting on with their lives, doing the best that they can - these are just people, and they made the opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words, and so I'm very mindful when I'm giving an answer that I'm not speaking for Wadeye, there's mob here that people should talk to - go talk to them about what they want in their communities. But for me again it comes back to that core principle, that self-determination, that they have that right.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** Felipe on Twitter asks 'if reconciliation is not genuine justice, what do you recommend that non-Indigenous white Australians do who are currently engaged in efforts to integrate Aboriginal history and cultural awareness into their communities?'

And I should probably have prefaced this with - there are a couple of these.

**LUKE PEARSON:** Okay, so what do I recommend whitefellas do, is what I what I heard.

Work it out? I don't know.

There's so much - and I think this is a big part of the problem with the pan-Indigenous, Indigenous leaders conversation - there's so many well meaning people who very sincerely, when you ask 'what do you want to see happening?', will say 'I want to support whatever Indigenous people want.' And it's like well I want one thing and you want another thing and Wadeye mob might want another thing - within Wadeye you know there's probably 20 different mobs who want 20 different things. You can't just fall back and use us as that excuse not to do your own research and come up with your own decisions.

And what what is happening in Indigenous spaces and what non-Indigenous people or individuals or organisations or systems or whatever are doing, of course needs to be informed by Indigenous voices. It needs to be informed by best practice, needs to be informed by evidence and common sense. But people have to take ownership of their own opinions within this space. Now you can agree with me, you can agree with someone else, but you can't say 'I defer my need to take ownership of my beliefs and my actions because I'm just doing whatever Indigenous people want,' because you'll do 50 different things with



every Indigenous person you meet. I have no idea if I answered this question. I feel bad for that fella.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** Deb Powell asks, 'Is reconciliation still a worthy goal? Are the RAPS of our corporate entities still valuable if they come from a genuine desire to make a difference?'

**LUKE PEARSON:** Oh... Yeah? Well, you know I look at RAPS and a lot of these things - like you could just do the right thing, like you don't really need... Don't be racist, hire Aboriginal people. But yeah, if a RAP helps you do that then have a RAP. That's cool. I'm fine with that. IndigenousX doesn't have a RAP and I can't see us getting one anytime soon. We're just getting on with it. I think a big part of that problem is these symbolic gestures that we don't interrogate. 'We've got a RAP, therefore we're doing something good,' as opposed to asking what's in your RAP - like, you've named one of the rooms in your building after a local language word or after a famous Aboriginal person, you have a reconciliation morning tea, fly the flag up the front - they're cool things, you should definitely *do* those things, but those things are not things if Indigenous people still can't succeed within your institutions, as staff or as clients or as whatever it is that you're doing. And you can just get on - that's why even the idea of a treaty... It's like if Australia had just done the right thing or just did the right thing then we wouldn't need the treaty because we just had those things, but because we don't have those things, if a treaty helps us get them then I'm all for it. If RAPS help reduce racism then I'm all on board.

**RHIANNA PATRICK:** I think we've got time for one more and Leonie has asked, 'As an educator, what role do you think our current education systems can play in telling our truth? They played a big role in covering up our truth, do you think they can have a positive impact?'

**LUKE PEARSON:** I think they have to. I did some work last year with ACARA on the teacher notes on Indigenous science and how to embed that throughout the curriculum, and a big conversation that we had internally around that process - and the development of their RAP plan, funnily enough - once that you know this is not an act of charity for them of doing something good, but it's a core responsibility that they hold.

When we're talking about education and science and Indigenous science in education - like science is what 'proved' that we were less than, that we were primitive. Education is the space that then taught the non-Indigenous people about that, while keeping Indigenous people out of education. And then even when we were let in... Now unfortunately, that's the double-edged sword of compulsory Aboriginal perspectives in schools: if you have someone who is at their core holding on to racist beliefs, and you make them teach about Aboriginal people and culture, they're going to teach racist things. And so, how we address that at that core level - it's not a curriculum document, it's not a work plan, it's not a lesson plan. And it's not positive education against ignorance or an act of charity. It's a professional responsibility that if they cannot teach our truths, then they are failing Indigenous students.

Too often we talk about Indigenous students failing at school: that's not possible. We make them go there. The school can fail those Indigenous students but Indigenous students cannot fail at school. That's an oxymoron and that's how we need to be changing those those narratives. So the role of teachers is absolutely fundamental, but unfortunately for them, a lot of those teachers, they went to school with those other racist teachers who taught

them that racist stuff, and then they went on to unis where it was not taught well and now they work in education systems that might have an Aboriginal education policy or an anti-racism policy, but they aren't enforced. Those frameworks only matter as much as people are held to account for them. And so until we can actually address the issue of racism in our schools, I fear that it's going to continue unabated.

-ENDS