Thank you Mr Speaker

Firstly, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

This parliament stands on what is, what was and what will always be Aboriginal land.

It is important – and right – that more Aboriginal people come to stand here as Members and Senators.

And I want to thank our friends from the Torres Strait for the welcome ceremony. It is always astonishing to see the world's oldest culture brought to life in front of you.

On behalf of the Opposition, I want to give a special welcome to the original warriors for change – and their proud family members.

Your presence here today enriches this day – it puts a human face on history.
In fighting to be part of the Australian identity, you gifted a larger identity to all Australians.

You and your guests simply make us more proud to be Australian.

Today we commemorate and celebrate two signal moments in our Australian story and we honour the heroes who made it possible.

The 1967 Referendum and the High Court’s Mabo decision were triumphs for truth-telling and for decency.

Both were platforms for further progress.

And overwhelmingly, both were victories authored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

People who for so long had been relegated to silent roles, or written out of the script altogether - took centre stage.

In 1967, they looked non-Indigenous Australia in the eye and said:

Count us together.

Make us one people.

And in 1992, the insulting, discriminatory fiction of *terra nullius* was overturned.

While he tragically did not live long enough to see justice done, Eddie Mabo kept the promise he made to his darling daughter Gail, who is here today, when he said:

‘One day, my girl, all of Australia is going to know my name’

Our country is bigger and better for the courage and endeavour we remember today.

But we should never forgot that neither of these acts we commemorate today sprang from a spontaneous act of national generosity.

None of these changes happened by accident - nor were they given as gifts from the table. These were earned.

They were battles against ignorance, fought in the face of indifference.
They were the result of struggle, the culmination of years of campaigning, of grassroots advocacy, of rallies and freedom rides.

Of lobbying and legal wrangling, the setbacks and sacrifice.

Like all great acts of progress – they were hard fought, hard work and hard won.

Victory didn’t just change our Constitution, or our laws, it changed our country for the better.

Mr Speaker, fifty years is not so long ago.

It’s not so long ago that fans could cheer the brilliance of the great Polly Farmer – a man who overcame polio to transform the role of ruckman forever.

But at the same time, when selected three times as an All-Australian, his Aboriginality meant he wasn’t counted as an Australian.

Not so long ago that Buddy Lea, a section commander in 10 Platoon at the Battle of Long Tan – could be shot, three times, while trying to carry a comrade to safety, return home a hero to his brothers-in-arms, he had the chance to die for Australia, yet not be counted in the census as an Australian.

Not so long ago that Australian mothers lived with the perpetual chronic anxiety that their child could be taken from them, stolen away from culture, country and connection.

And you only have to talk to members of the Stolen Generations - as the Prime Minister and I did yesterday - to know that shadow has still not even departed.

Mr Speaker

Exclusion from the census was a disgraceful insult - the bitter legacy of the political bickering of Federation and its obsession with ‘race’.

But far more harm was done by the provision which prevented the Commonwealth from making laws with regard to Aboriginal Australians.

This gave successive Federal Commonwealth governments an alibi for failure - it left the First Australians at the mercy of a patchwork of arbitrary state policies.

Struggling against institutionalised prejudice which cemented inequality and denied basic freedoms.
A racist system which broke families – and shattered connections with country.

Where men, women and children lived with the fear that on a policeman’s whim or an administrator’s paternalism they could be deported from their communities to hell-holes hundreds of miles away.

We do honour to the people of 1967 and the plaintiffs of Mabo to use today as time to think hard about the cost of institutionalised prejudice – to generations and to our nation.

On the weekend, Michael Gordon wrote movingly of what Indigenous Queenslanders called ‘life under the act’

He spoke with the remarkable Iris Paulson, one of 11 children, sent to Brisbane from Cherbourg mission to work as a servant for ‘pocket money’.

Iris still carries her ‘exemption card’ which allowed her to travel and to marry without permission from the authorities.

She still carries the memory of Auntie Celia’s inspiration.

A proud Aboriginal woman who:

\[\text{Said what she thought at a time when a lot of people were too scared to speak, for fear of being pushed back onto the reserves.} \]

The Prime Minister has mentioned some of the names but:

- Auntie Celia
- Pearl Gibbs
- Charles Perkins
- Jessie Street
- Faith Bandler
- Pastor Doug Nicholls
- Stan Davey
- Bert Groves
- Joe McGinnis
- Kath Walker
- Chicka Dixon
And many others, some of who we are privileged to have here today, deserve recognition for making the 1967 referendum possible.

All had witnessed – and lived with – inequality.

Faith Bandler used to talk about her time in Young, picking cherries for the Land Army during the Second World War.

Chatting with the Aboriginal people working on the adjoining property.

She learned they were picking the same fruit, at the same pace, for the same purpose – but for far less money.

Doug Nicholls’ speed and skill took him all the way from the Goulburn Valley League, to train with the famous Carlton Football Club.

One night, he went into the rooms for a rub-down.

The trainer refused – point blank - to touch him. He would not put his white hands on Doug’s black skin.

Carlton's loss became Fitzroy’s success. Doug went on to become a Fitzroy champion – but he never forgot that night.

I welcome his daughter, Pam Pederson here today.

This is the world it is perhaps too easy to forget existed. But this is the world that the people we honour today lived in - these are the attitudes and practices they were up against.

Their task was far bigger than one campaign for one vote. It meant:

· Breaking the ‘great Australian silence’ that cheapened and diminished our history.
· Opening the eyes of this country to inequality and poverty
· And finding new ways to tell a story as old as Australia’s European history.

In May 1957, a full ten years before the vote, Pastor Doug Nicholls screened a film in the Sydney Town Hall showing the hardship experienced by Aboriginal people living in the Warburton Ranges.
It captured hunger and disease – it showed children ‘too weak to brush flies from their face’.

One newspaper reported: “there were cries of disgust and horror – and people openly wept”

The meeting attended by 1500 or so – and supported by the Australian Workers Union - launched the first petition to parliament for Constitutional change, tabled by the Labor Member for Parkes, Les Haylen.

In the years that followed folding tables and clipboards were set up in church halls and shopping streets, in country towns and big cities.

And by 1963, campaigners for change had collected 103,000 names – before the internet, before social media and before smartphones. This was human commitment: face-to-face meetings and persuasive argument.

Soon, members of the house started referring to the petition as the ‘morning prayer’ - because it was the first item of business every day.

This was all hard graft – eroding resistance, tackling self-interest, refusing to rest until the issue was at the centre of the political debate.

Everything done on a shoestring budget of small coin donations.

And finally to a referendum, the highest hurdle in Australian politics, asking Australians to vote Yes for Aboriginal people.

I want to say, as we acknowledge the champions and heroes here, I want to acknowledge the 90.8 per cent of Australian, perhaps some of us here, our parents and grandparents - they too deserve credit for righting a long-overdue wrong.

That overwhelming verdict speaks for a country that came late to the need for institutional change – but our families did get there in the end.

And it speaks for people who refused to take ‘No’ for an answer.

As the celebrated poet Oodgeroo put it:

“The real victory was the spirit of hope and optimism…

We had won something… We were visible, hopeful and vocal.
“Fringe-dwellers, no more”

Mr Speaker

The same spirit lived in Eddie Mabo - he knew who he was and where he belonged.

As he said: ‘sticking a union jack in the sand’ didn’t ‘wipe out 16 generations’.

He took that essential truth all the way to the highest court in land.

And for once, a justice system which had so often failed and disappointed our first Australians, came through.

Native title became part of the inherited common law – not dependent on the largesse of government or second place to business deals.

Eddie Mabo’s victory stretched far beyond the sand and waters of the island he loved.

It reached back two centuries to eliminate the ignorant lie of *terra nullius* and enshrine in our laws: the bond between the world’s oldest living culture and this ancient continent.

It also proved that one man, with love for his country and his culture in his soul can change the world.

Mr Speaker

Mabo was an historic decision – and the Keating Government made it an historic turning point. Without regard for politics or polls, Paul Keating took the opportunity to ensure justice was done.

He brought Indigenous leaders to the Cabinet table itself to negotiate the Native Title Act - including our friend, now-Senator Patrick Dodson.

In the Senate itself, Gareth Evans spent more than 48 hours of the debate on his feet, taking questions and fending off an attempted Opposition filibuster.

Today we are all the beneficiaries and witnesses to the legacy of Paul Keating’s courage.

Mr Speaker
In remembering these historic achievements, we are reminded of the tension, the balance between celebrating success, honouring our past and recognising unfinished business.

Reconciliation has always depended on truth-telling.

We love to say Australia punches above our weight - and it does.

Nowhere is that more true than in the brilliant accomplishments of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

- Scientists making breakthroughs
- Authors winning acclaim
- Artists
- Architects
- Rangers on country
- Olympians
- Senators
- Ministers
- Australians of the year
- Champions in every footy code.

This is all true. But what is also true is the inequality that brought tears to the eyes of that crowd in Sydney Town Hall in 1957 - that inequality, in different forms, still lives with us.

Stubbornly, obstinately, not yet eradicated.

In different guises, paternalism and neglect still afflict our policy-making.

Empowerment is said a lot more than it is delivered.

In too many ways, not enough has changed in 50 years.

Too many young Aboriginal men are more likely to go to jail than to university.

40 per cent of Aboriginal children are in out-of-home care. Children growing up away from their country and from kin, away from their culture – struggling at school during the day, battling trauma at night.

Too many mothers still lose their precious babies to preventable disease.
Too many of our first peoples grow up with lesser opportunity – for good jobs, decent housing, a happy family and a long life.

Changing this means tackling the nitty-gritty of practical disadvantage.

Understanding that what works in Yirrkala might not apply in Palm Island, that what succeeds for the Murri might not deliver for the Pitjantjarra.

Recognising that every community, whilst linked by their Australianess, has its own culture and its own particular circumstances.

But regardless of the community, every community of our first Australians has the right to participate in the Australian story – and we should do whatever it takes to give them that chance.

As a parliament and a people we should come to this task with humility as well as hope.

It is why Constitutional Recognition is most hard – but most important.

Securing a place of honour for the first Australians on our national birth certificate isn’t the final word, or the end of the road. We understand that.

But it does say we are serious - serious about justice, both historical and real.

It says we’re prepared to help write a new story with Aboriginal people, our first Australians, a chapter which is a story of belonging.

That’s why Recognition cannot be empty poetry authored by white people.

It has to be as real as Australia can make it, as meaningful as we are capable collectively of achieving.

In that spirit, we await the conclusion of the gathering at Uluru – and the advice presented to the Prime Minister and myself, and all of us privileged to serve this parliament.

Mr Speaker

Fifty years ago – to the Holt Government’s great credit – it didn’t fund the case against constitutional change.
Remarkable really. A parliament full of white men, many born at the turn of the 20th Century, approved a straightforward statement of the ‘Yes’ case.

And I quote:

*Our personal sense of justice, our common sense, and our international reputation in a world in which racial issues are being highlighted every day, require that we get rid of this out-moded provision.*

If that parliament, in those days could find common ground on the elimination of discrimination from the Constitution.

If they could summon the humility to acknowledge that however firmly they had clung to their old attitudes, those attitudes were wrong.

Then surely we – 50 years later - in our more reconciled, a more confident and more diverse modern Australia.

Surely we can find it in our abilities, in our intellect, in our heart to achieve Constitutional Recognition.

So, in celebrating these old anniversaries and looking back – it falls to this parliament, to ask ourselves the question: What will be our contribution going forward?

The words and the sentiment of everyone here is admirable, it is excellent. But we will not have the ability to shirk the question that will be asked of us.

It is our turn to step up. Not to find fault - but to find common ground.

Not to look for the lowest common denominator - but to find change that we hopefully, in 10 to 20 years’ time, can say: Do you remember when answered up? When we measured up?

When we spoke to the better angels of the Australian nature. That we actually said that this Constitution can afford to recognise our first Australians.

I am grateful for the presence of so many of those who campaigned in 1967, of those who campaigned in 1992, of the family members.

You give us inspiration.

You do this place honour.
I sincerely hope and promise - that we will do our very best to carry that spirit, and your courage for the questions we must answer.

We must answer affirmatively for Constitutional Recognition of our first Australians.

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