



TRANSCRIPT OF RECORDING

CHARLES PAKANA (KEIR WELLS)

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CHARLES PAKANA: In delivering my submission today, I acknowledge that I am on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, lands that have been wrested from them by governments and individuals, all seeking to gain profit. I recognise that the connection of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people to this land, the connected waters, their culture and law is inherently sovereign. I also acknowledge the great and unjudging support, friendship and mentorship that I have experienced from so many amazing Victorian Aboriginal leaders. Gunditjmara woman Aunty Jill Gallagher. Bangerang Wiradjuri and Taungurung woman, Aunty Esme Bamblett. Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung lore man Uncle Bill Nicholson, and so many others. My name is Keir Lalor Wells, and although it is not the name by which I am known within community, it is my legal name and one of which I am actually very proud. I am named after Keir Hardie, the first Member of Parliament for the English Labour Party, and I am named after Peter Lalor, the leader of the miners at the Eureka Stockade. I was given the names of socialist fighters, just as my parents were both socialist fighters. And in saying that I pay my eternal respect to my father, and also to my non-Aboriginal mother, without whose support I feel sure I would not be the proud and strong Aboriginal man I am today. I have, I believe firmly, done my best to live up to the legacy of my birth names and to the hopes and aspirations of my amazing parents. By choice, I have adopted and am known by the name Charles Pakana. Charles in honour of my Aboriginal father, Charles Frederick Wells, who having been born in Tasmania in 1918, was forced to hide his aboriginality to avoid being taken from his white grandmother, with whom he lived.

And I have adopted the surname of Pakana, meaning people in the language of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. I adopted that name in order to remind me constantly of my aboriginality, and importantly, that I am simply one of many. The submission I make today is on behalf of my Aboriginal grandmother, my Aboriginal father and my three Aboriginal daughters. All disconnected Aboriginal people, and it is on the matter of disconnection, forced disconnection that I base my submission. We know that acts of genocide have been perpetrated upon the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this country. Acts of genocide, as defined clearly in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly on the 9th of December, 1948. We recognise that as a result of these acts there is a human tragedy that is loss of life, loss of language, loss of lore, loss of culture. We recognise the untold thousands comprising the stolen generations. We recognise that slavery was visited upon Aboriginal people, so many of whom suffered the additional humiliation of being enslaved on their very own country. Little, though, is given to the recognition of Aboriginal people who, as a result of those genocidal acts, can never gain connection to their land, culture, language, lore and family. I suppose we can be considered to be the inconvenient Aboriginal people.

In many cases, that inconvenience is lessened on community, broader community, by means of disconnected Aboriginal people simply resigning themselves to the fact that they will never be connected to community, and therefore tragically becoming

another success for those who have sought to breed us out. Yet there are those of us who refuse to disappear. We are the ones who heed the words of the poet Dylan Thomas when he wrote:

5 "do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light"

I am one of those. Despite experiencing years of open hostility from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, I have refused to deny my heritage and the pride I have in that heritage. I have had to fight for my identity like so many others have had to do. I have had to prove my worth to and rightful place in community, without being able to fall back in confidence and indeed comfort on family connection, because family connection simply is not there. It is my intention now to share some of the challenges I have faced as an Aboriginal man, not to impress or gain sympathy, but to demonstrate clearly that there are those of us, we disconnected Aboriginal people, who can and do contribute significantly to our communities, and to speak out for one thing and one thing only; acknowledgement.

I moved to Melbourne alone when I was 50 years old. I knew no one in community, and had no connection whatsoever to any local Aboriginal group, community or gathering place, and since that move nearly 20 years ago, I have fought and continued to fight for my identity and the rights of Aboriginal Victoria. Over the years and despite disconnection, I have worked with Victorian local governments such as Moonee Valley, Darebin, Merri-bek, Yarra City, Wyndham, Geelong, Kingston and Banyule to promote greater understanding of truth, treaty and voice. I have successfully introduced to Banyule City Council the initiative, and advocated for, that city to be the first in Victoria to adopt in place of a Reconciliation Action Plan, a self-determination strategy. Despite disconnection, I became the inaugural chairman of the Barrbunin Beek Aboriginal Gathering Place in Heidelberg West, a gathering place that is now well along the path of becoming yet another clear example of Aboriginal self-determination. Despite disconnection, I campaigned fiercely throughout 2023 to promote the truth of the great benefits to this country that would have been realised through a constitutionally enshrined voice to Parliament. Despite disconnection, I have maintained my public and often outspoken advocacy for treaties between the Victorian State government and Aboriginal Victoria since 2018. Despite disconnection, I have, as an Aboriginal man, stood and spoken for truth, treaty and voice alongside activists such as internationally recognised reconciliation academic professor Andrew Gunston. Wiradjuri man, archdeacon Uncle Glenn Loughrey, and author and activist Thomas Mayo, and so many others. Despite disconnection, I continue my work as an independent Aboriginal journalist, broadcaster and public speaker, focused almost entirely on the beauty and positivity that is Aboriginal Victoria. I was given the title of Uncle first by Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung elder and lore man, Uncle Bill Nicholson.

It is not a title I sought, and I still feel somewhat uncomfortable in carrying it, primarily because of disconnection. It is a title, though, that I take all the more seriously, not just for the recognition of the work I have undertaken, but for the responsibility it carries to deliver leadership and guidance for others, Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal, and to deliver it in a manner underpinned by fairness and above all, humility. In delivering this submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission, I call upon Aboriginal communities across Victoria to take on board the disconnected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, to welcome us and afford us the opportunity to become involved in community, not to afford us a free ticket. That should never be the case. After all, I firmly believe that to be Aboriginal is to commit wholeheartedly to the aspirations of community. From government, All governments. I am not calling for compensation. I am not calling for an apology. I am not calling for any special dispensation. I am calling for acknowledgement.

10 Acknowledgement from the government that carries a legacy of genocidal acts to which it has admitted, but has yet to come forward and directly acknowledge the brutal disconnection those acts have inflicted upon thousands of Aboriginal people. We are the ones who, without family, clan and nation support, continue to fight as best we can for a better Victoria and Australia. We deserve the basic human right to

15 be acknowledged for who and what we are.

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