

By Ian Lowe

I grew up totally ignorant of the frontier wars, the massacres, the rapes, the poisonings and the violent dispossession of the first Australians. School history consisted of the First Fleet, the explorers and the introduction to the continent of such European practices as large-scale mining, broad-acre cropping and grazing animals. Several local settlements had names that clearly reflected the original people, but I never actually saw an Indigenous person until I was in my late teens and living in Sydney.

We can no longer pretend not to know our own history. Scholars such as Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan have documented in shocking details the actions of the European invaders. The Mabo decision by the High Court more than thirty years ago exposed the fallacy of *terra nullius*, revealing that the land was appropriated by a process that could legitimately be called robbery with violence. Paul Keating's Redfern speech was an acknowledgement by our national government of the need to recognise the injustice and begin the process of reconciliation. *Bringing Them Home* detailed the damage done to the stolen generation. Successive Coalition governments led by John Howard, Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison obfuscated, blustered and denied the need to engage respectfully with the first Australians. The current Leader of the Opposition walked out of the chamber to avoid being involved in Kevin Rudd's apology to the stolen generation.

We now have a chance to begin the serious and long-overdue process of reconciliation. The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a modest and generous document, inviting us all to work together to produce an Australia of which we can be proud. Establishing a Voice to Parliament so our government is informed about the need and wishes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people is a modest and entirely reasonable first step. For decades, successive governments have failed to close the gap in life expectancy and failed to solve the social problems in many Indigenous communities. We will continue to fail if our decision-makers are not informed by those affected by their policies.

As Professor Marcia Langton has written, this is a once-in-many-generations opportunity, just as the 1967 referendum was. We cannot afford to miss this chance to begin the long-overdue process of reconciliation. We owe it to all future generations of Australians to do all we can to ensure the success of the referendum.