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**InFocus**

# Thomas Mayor

**Torres Strait Islander, author, activist and unionist Thomas Mayor talks to journalist Monica Crouch about the importance of education, family and connection to culture – and the paths they've opened up for him.**

A formative episode in Thomas Mayor's life came in the form of the 1998 waterfront dispute, a momentous chapter in Australian industrial relations history that led Mayor to become a union representative in his workplace. After 16 years on the wharves he became a full time union official and is now Deputy Branch Secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia's Northern Territory Branch.

Mayor, who lives in Darwin, is also a son, brother and father. He is the eldest of three children, and one of his two sisters is a teacher. His father, Celestino Mayor, is a Torres Strait Islander of Philippine and Dayak ancestry and his mother, Liz Mayor,

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Giveaways

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brings Polish, Jewish and English ancestry to the family.

Mayor distils his deep and diverse heritage succinctly. “I am a Torres Strait Islander born and raised on Larrakia land, who loves family above all, and who has been following my heart to do what is right,” he writes in his book *Finding the Heart of the Nation: The journey of the Uluru Statement towards Voice, Treaty and Truth* (Hardie Grant, 2019).

Mayor also advocates eloquently for three changes essential to Australia’s growth as a nation: a First Nations’ Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution; a Treaty between the Australian Government and First Nations People; and truth telling about the nation’s history.

In 2017, after then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull rejected a First Nations’ Voice to Parliament, Mayor took the original Uluru Statement from the Heart canvas to the people. What he found was a welcoming nation willing to listen and ready for change. Mayor’s extensive travels inspired him to write *Finding the Heart of the Nation*.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart, reproduced in full in the book’s opening pages, invites us all to walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people “in a movement of the Australian people for a better future”.

Here, we walk with Mayor through some important phases in his own history and hear his hopes for the future.

### **School days**

Mayor has always lived in Darwin, where he attended Holy Family Catholic Primary School, Karama. “It was a good school,” Mayor says. “And given my family lived on one average income, I know my parents sacrificed a lot to send my two sisters and I there.”

After primary school came O’Loughlin Catholic College, Karama, up to Year 8. “I kept getting in trouble for not tucking in my shirt – I was terribly skinny and I hated it,” Mayor says. He then attended Sanderson Middle School and Casuarina Senior College for Years 11 and 12.

But there was a significant gap in the curriculum. “In school, I was taught very little about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – our history and culture,” he says. “We were taught that Captain Cook discovered Australia and that the Indigenous peoples, in the very few mentions of us, were nomadic, and there was no pain or suffering to mention. It just was.”

Something was seriously missing. “School didn’t teach me about my culture,” Mayor says. “On reflection, school was teaching the opposite of what I was experiencing. I was lucky compared to some kids, and I see the effect it has on some people, who are always fighting for their identity.

“We need to improve the curriculum so that Australian children learn the truth; so Indigenous children can feel accepted for who they are; and so all Australians, together, can embrace a connection to the lands and waters that is unique to anywhere else in the world – more than 100,000 years of continuous culture.”

It was Mayor’s father who connected him to culture, however indirectly. Celestino Mayor was born under the Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act 1939 (Qld), and was among the first generation to escape the total control of the supposed “Protector” when this Act was repealed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Act 1965.

“His attitude was to just work hard, not complain, and get on with it,” Mayor says. “But we practised culture in our own ways. Dad taught me to hunt traditional foods, such as turtles and dugongs. I was also fortunate enough to practise and perform island dancing as I was growing up, with other Torres Strait Islanders in the Darwin community who did express culture.”

Mayor is largely philosophical about his school years. “I enjoyed most of my schooling,” he says. “I was still quite young when I realised that the school years are a short part of life, and compared to working each day, and all the other responsibilities that come with adulthood, school is a time to enjoy.

“I therefore have mostly fond memories of school – kicking the footy around at lunch; causing mischief and occasionally getting in trouble. There were hard times as well, mainly in early primary. I was often teased about being a very skinny boy or being an ‘Abo’. But I remember this changed once I learnt to defend myself, and when more Indigenous children joined the school.”

### **Teachers with high impact**

“I will always remember my Year 11 English teacher, Ms Arthur,” Mayor says. “In a couple of the tests and assessments, I got great marks, which surprised me. I was still having too much fun! Ms Arthur told me I would write a book one day, which I thought was impossible.” Fast forward to 2020, and Mayor is the author of two books, *Finding the Heart of the Nation* and the children’s book, *Finding our Heart*.

“From Ms Arthur, I learnt that it means a lot to a youth’s development if their strengths are identified to them and encouraged,” Mayor says. “Also, if a child is taught in a way they can enjoy.”

““ I will always remember my Year 11 English teacher, Ms Arthur. She told me I would write a book one day, which I thought was impossible. ””

Mayor believes there are many ways to be an effective teacher. “My favourite and most effective teachers were both strict and relaxed,” he says. “They had completely different styles and attitudes. Their personal characters and strengths were completely different.”

Mayor was also aware of some of the struggles teachers face in their profession. “From what I have observed as a student, as a parent, and from listening to teachers and my sister who is a teacher, it is as much about how a teacher is resourced to do their work that can make or break how effective they are,” he says.

“I believe our education system must improve student-teacher ratios, teaching tools and facilities, teaching environments and a curriculum that provides students with the freedom to learn in a caring, interpersonal and adaptive way,” he says.

“Because, as far as I can tell, even the most effective teachers are struggling because of these factors.”

Again, he turns to the place of family. “It is also how a student is being loved and cared for at home,” he says. “A teacher will always struggle to be effective if the student is suffering outside of school.”

### **Precious memories**

During his travels throughout Australia, Mayor made an impromptu visit to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School on Thursday Island, unrolling the original Uluru Statement from the Heart canvas for the school community to see.

“I took away with me some very special memories,” Mayor says. “The principal was very kind and supportive. The teachers were excited and the kids noticed this reaction, and they responded in the same way. They asked great questions and when one of the students, Ahliyah, interviewed me as a reporter does for NITV, the visit became that much more special.”

### **Meaningful mentors**

First and foremost is family. “My parents have been my most significant influence,” he says. “I admire my father’s incredible work ethic and resilience. At the same time, I have learnt from his flaws, how he was harsh at times when he need not have been.

“I admire my mum’s care and understanding and appreciate that she sacrificed so much of herself to raise my sisters and me.

“There was no greater influence for me. This includes when I consciously chose paths in my career or personal life that I knew they would not approve of. I think they have kept me

grounded.

Then comes education. “I believe that receiving a good education has certainly influenced the path I am on now,” Mayor says. “Having the confidence to write, to socialise, to use a computer and calculate how to solve a problem in an educated way cannot be underestimated for the advantages these skills provide, as compared to someone who has no such education.”

Then there’s the union movement. “A huge influence, absolutely, has been my education as a union member,” Mayor says. “The union taught me about standing up and speaking out when something is wrong, or when there is a need for improvement. It was through the union that I furthered my writing, by taking up disputes on behalf of my comrades as a delegate.

“I learnt progressive thinking, rather than the ignorant ways of the past, especially the way men behaved. The lessons I learnt on the job, on the wharf, in the union meetings, were the most valuable to the path I am on now.”

### **Working on the wharves**

After finishing Year 12, Mayor sat an aptitude test for government traineeships and landed the very one he wanted. “I started work as a maritime trainee in 1994,” he says.

“I remember the old wharfies gently encouraging me to join the union. They told me about the credit union and the superannuation as institutions the union had built that would be good for me as a young man.

“They showed me the importance of joining by example, the way we collectively handled the issues that arose around safety and pay. I joined very soon after becoming a trainee.



“I had no family activism background, though I’m sure Dad was

a member of the relevant union and a Labor voter. He just never talked about it though.”

In 1998 came that push to break the union that only served to make it stronger. With the support of the Howard Government, seaport operator Patrick Stevedores dismissed its entire unionised workforce of 1400, locking them out of the wharves – and their livelihoods. After a four month struggle, Patrick’s move was ruled illegal by the Federal Court and the wharfies regained their jobs.

“My greatest lesson about the importance of the union came from the Patrick’s dispute,” says Mayor (pictured above right with United Workers Union organiser Wayne Kurnoth and NT Labor Senator Malarndirri McCarthy).

“It showed me the stark difference between the interests of employers and the government, as compared to my union.

“Before 1998, the employer was telling me they wanted to promote me to supervisor. But that dispute solidified my resolve to fight for fellow workers. I didn’t want to be a boss.”

### **How teachers can help**

Mayor invites teachers in the IEU to walk with him. “It would be a wonderfully powerful action if all teachers included the Uluru Statement, the history of the struggle that made it and what it proposes, in their lessons,” he says.

“I don’t think this need only be for those who teach social studies. With some initiative and imagination, I am sure there are ways to introduce Voice, Treaty and Truth, even if in small parts, into other subject matter.

“A Voice to Parliament, after all, is just a representative body with democratic processes. It is an enhancement of a people’s position through collectivism and structure.

“A Treaty is just an agreement. It will require negotiation, truth telling and reconciling with the past. Statistics and data will be part of an equation for an agreement. And Makarrata is a process of dispute resolution.

“And in Truth Telling, there is so much to learn. The morals and the results of when race is used as a tool of oppression. How wages were stolen, and the compounding effect of this dispossession over hundreds of years.

“I encourage teachers to read the Uluru Statement for its eloquence and its subtle references to moments in this nation’s history. Consider where the phrases, ‘a rightful place’, and ‘born therefrom, remain attached thereto, one day return thither’ come from.

“ I believe that receiving a good education has influenced the path I am on now. Having the confidence to write, socialise, use a computer and calculate how to solve a problem in an educated way cannot be underestimated.”

### **Campaign for referendum**

The “From the Heart” campaign for a constitutionally enshrined First Nations’ Voice to Parliament aims to get a referendum on the agenda late in the next term of federal government. While the COVID-19 pandemic is top of the national agenda for now, the campaign is still developing steadily.

“Our focus is on building awareness,” Mayor says. “We know from our research that awareness correlates strongly with support. Hence, educating people in our unions and personal networks is vital at this stage.

“We must not give up, this is something that Australia must do.”

### **Gratitude and hope**

Mayor holds the teachers of the IEU in high regard. “I want to thank the IEU for your solidarity,” he says.

“You were one of the first unions to take action, and this will not be forgotten. I hope that your part in this long struggle for



fairness toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be something your members teach to children in the schools of a country that celebrates more than 100,000 years of continuous culture.”

### **Advocacy Course: Voice. Treaty. Truth.**

Join Thomas Mayor to learn about the history of First Nations’ struggles; the Uluru Statement from the Heart; ways to advocate on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; building the skills and confidence to handle objections to a First Nations’ Voice to Parliament; campaign messaging and mapping; and a chance to ask questions.

The course is open to all union members. It is run online in two 3-hour sessions:

Find out more: <https://www.atui.org.au/voice-treaty-truth-advocacy-course>

“I developed this course within the union movement for union members, because I believe it is unionists who can make this long overdue change happen,” Mayor says.

“You can help me mobilise the mighty union movement to the Uluru Statement cause.”