

# Statement from the Heart is a gift to the nation, not a grab for power

[Waleed Aly](#) July 29, 2022 — 5.00am

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## Opinion

There is something admirable about Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's full-throated support for the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#). Not so much its passion as its clarity.

Consider the language he used in a speech at the opening of parliament this week. "The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a generous offer," he said, before repeating the key word for effect. "Generous. It's a hand out, just saying please, hold it. Hold it. That's all people are asking for!"



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese during a Welcome to Country ceremony at Parliament House on Tuesday. *Alex Ellnghausen*

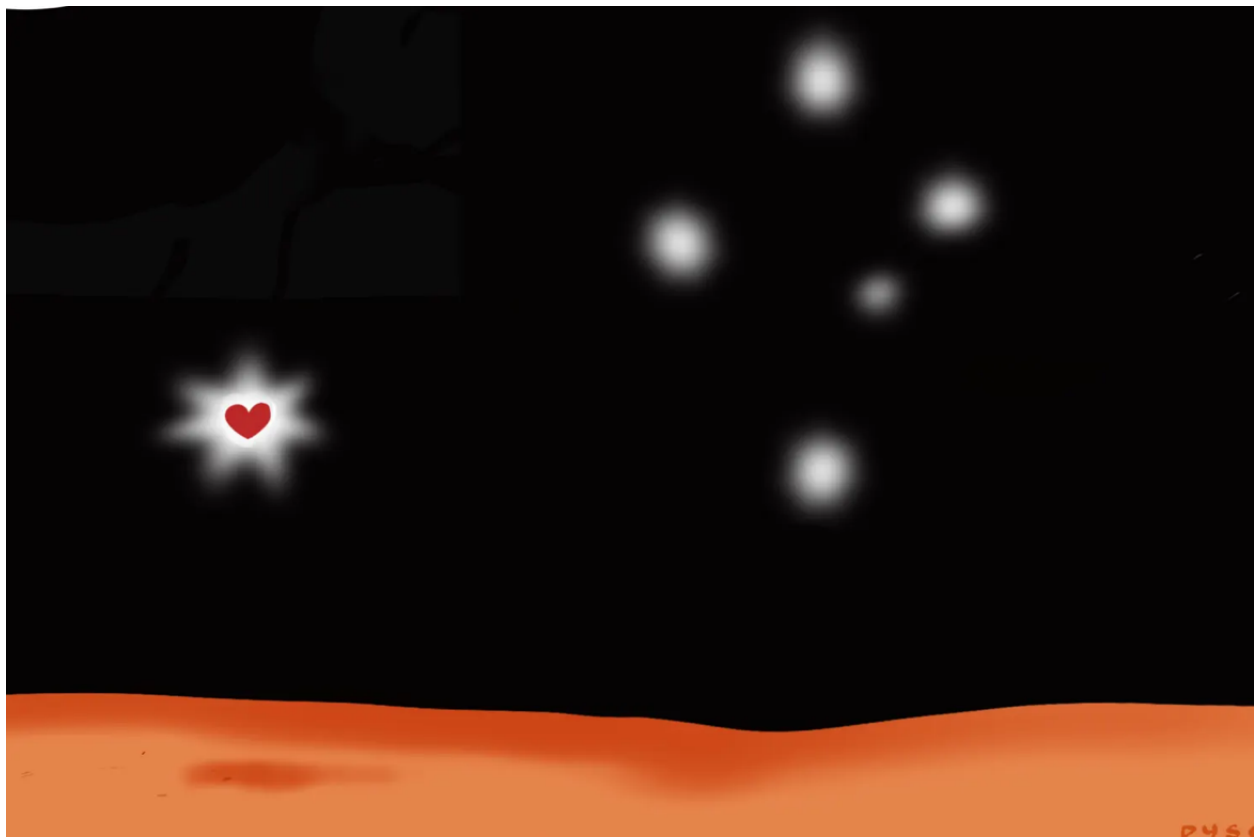
Here, Albanese is completely reframing what Malcolm Turnbull so badly misrepresented. Turnbull, you'll recall, described the Uluru statement's

most famous recommendation – the establishment of a First Nations Voice to Parliament in the Constitution – as a “[third chamber](#)”. You might also recall that this is flatly incorrect. The Voice would be a standing advisory group with no power to vote, pass or block legislation. It is in no way even remotely a “chamber” of parliament.

Turnbull’s description didn’t merely distort the detail. It distorted the whole spirit of the statement. It presented it as a demand, as a power grab. And in this way, it tapped into a dubious, but well-established tradition of presenting Indigenous affairs as a zero-sum game, where every Indigenous advance must be a loss for the rest of Australia.

A segment of Australia will almost certainly continue to see things that way. So, even if the “third chamber” canard disappears as it should, we can expect to hear a familiar line of argument against the Voice: that it gives Indigenous people a special status and thereby undermines the idea that we’re all simply Australians. Pauline Hanson gave us something of a dry run of that when she [stormed out of the Senate’s acknowledgement of Country](#) this week.

In that context, for Albanese to characterise the Uluru statement not as a grab but a gift, not as a demand but an offer, is a quietly major thing to do. It also has the advantage of being correct. When Albanese describes the Uluru statement as “generous”, it isn’t spin. It shows he understands the statement quite deeply.



"The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a generous offer," Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said. *Andrew Dyson*

And from there, it allows him to do something inventive: to make reconciliation a patriotic act, rather than an act of mere deference or self-flagellation. So, he concludes his theme of generosity like this: "I know that Australians in the way that they deal with their lives are generous towards their neighbours, towards their community, and towards the whole country." He's suggesting Australians will recognise the Uluru statement's generosity because it chimes with their own.

The statement's generosity lies in the fact that, despite all the tragic history our Indigenous people have experienced, it is not seeking to attack the nation or exclude from it, but to join it fully. Yes, it repeats the refrain that Indigenous sovereignty "has never been ceded", but it explains that this notion of "sovereignty" has a specific, highly specialised meaning.

It is "a spiritual notion" that describes the permanent connection the people have to their ancestors and to the land. That is very different to "sovereignty" as we generally use the term: namely to connote exclusive, territorial, political control. Indigenous sovereignty is not exclusive in the same way: in the phrasing of the statement, "it co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown".

That accepts the legitimacy of the nation. To be more explicit, it has our First Nations accepting the legitimacy of the nation that dispossessed them. That is surely a generous posture. And this reconciliatory approach permeates the entire statement. So, it asserts that “this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood”. It seeks to allow Indigenous people “to take a rightful place in our own country”. It wants their children to “walk in two worlds” with their culture being “a gift to their country”. This is entirely an ethos of connection, of contributing to a common project with a common future.

This is exactly why the Uluru statement faces opposition from the more radical end of the Indigenous political spectrum. [Some delegates walked out of the four-day convention](#) where the statement was ratified because it was too conciliatory, too generous, gave too much credence to the settler-state. Put bluntly, this more radical position does not accept the legitimacy of Australia as it stands, holding that such legitimacy can only be earned through a treaty.

At that point, those with this brand of politics will have to reconcile themselves with Australian sovereignty – it’s just a matter of on what terms it does so – but for now, it is very much a policy of resistance. This is the politics influencing the Greens, [whose official position doesn’t support the Voice to Parliament](#) until after a process of truth-telling and treaty. It is this kind of approach that has led Greens Leader Adam Bandt [not to appear at press conferences with the Australian flag](#).



The closing ceremony of the First Nations National Convention in Uluru, which produced the Statement from the Heart. *Alex Ellinghausen*

It is no surprise that Labor attacked Bandt so vociferously for this. This allowed Labor to underscore the patriotic dimensions of its approach, as Albanese has sought to do that from the beginning. “We are the greatest country on Earth,” he said in his victory speech on election night – the same speech in which he placed the Uluru statement so firmly on the agenda with his very first remarks. He wants the country to accept these two positions are not in tension, but entirely complementary.

If Albanese succeeds in this – if he truly makes reconciliation an act of patriotism – he will have changed something in the grammar of Australian politics. He will have reclaimed patriotism for Labor on Labor’s terms. Terms that render the Coalition’s patriotism a touch nationalist and shrill, and exposes the Greens’ discomfort with patriotism per se. This could be crucial for the Voice because at this point, it finds itself assailed from all sides, which is an especially tough position from which to launch a referendum.

Might the patriotic case for it cajole some sceptics? Of course, that’s a long way off for the moment. We don’t even know what form the Voice will

take, much less whether it will survive the acid bath that is a referendum. But right now, Albanese has at least given it a generous enough chance.

**Waleed Aly is a regular columnist.**

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