

'There's nothing vindictive about the Voice' says Tom Calma

[Tom McIlroy](#)



Tom Calma's name is attached to a major blueprint for the design of the Voice to parliament. *Rohan Thomson*

Tom Calma has moved appointments to make Lunch with the AFR happen today. We meet on the UC campus, where the Kungarakan elder and Iwaidja man serves as chancellor. After interviews for the university council, he'll fly to Sydney for meetings, before giving evidence to a closely watched parliamentary inquiry considering the Indigenous Voice later in the week.

Calma explains his parents met at Coomalie Creek, on the family's traditional lands. They moved to Darwin when Tom was three. He still owns the family home at Fannie Bay.

"Dad was self-taught. He had only gone to early high school when he left to go out to employment," he explains.

His father was an Iwaidja man, from the Coburg Peninsula, but like many Aboriginal Australians, his family was dispossessed of their land. He worked his way up from being a truck driver, to a work supervisor, eventually becoming a technical officer with the federal government.

“He was probably one of the highest-ranking Aboriginal public servants and was heavily involved in the clean-up post Cyclone Tracy, cleaning up roads.

“My mother was a homemaker and worked on the farm. Her mother, my grandmother, a lady named Anmilil, had her three youngest children forcibly removed.

Response to Government to the National Apology (Tom Calma)

“Mum and her sister were lucky, because when they were taking children my grandfather sent them to St Gabriel’s boarding school in Charters Towers, in Queensland. Rather than being taken away, he actually sent them away.

“That was the legacy that we became very aware of as young children. All the way through my growing up we were aware of the practice, because we had on both sides of the family children who were removed.”

Calma met his wife, Heather, while they were studying at the South Australian Institute for Technology in the 1970s. They have been married for 45 years and have three children.

Calma presented his daughter with her UC degree in 2017, and the

couple's children were on hand when Prime Minister Anthony Albanese presented Calma with his [Senior Australian of the Year](#) award this year.

Truth telling

The experience of his forebears was front of mind when Calma delivered a formal response to Kevin Rudd's 2008 national apology to the Stolen Generation. Speaking at Parliament House, Calma told the story of his great-grandmother on his father's side, who was taken from her family.

Her name appears on a December 1899 document titled "List of half-castes in the NT". The report says the girl's mother refused to part with her, evidence Calma cites to rebut people who claim Aboriginal children weren't taken away, but were handed over willingly by their parents. Despite the pain, he used the speech to call for a process of national healing to begin that day.

"That's what truth telling is a little bit about," he says as we start to eat. "It is making sure that things that are history are actually known to everybody.

"There's nothing vindictive about this, about people understanding who we are as a nation, and that we have to really take the opportunity to form a new nation.

"We have to shed ourselves of the past, when we were colonised and to recognise that with colonisation, not only in Australia but globally, there are a lot of significant detrimental impacts on Indigenous peoples."



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese with Calma in January at the Australian of the Year Award ceremony. **Alex Ellinghausen**

Since the 1980s, Calma has been a leading campaigner for Indigenous social justice and reconciliation. He served from 1995 until 2002 as an Australian diplomat in India and Vietnam, representing the country's education and training sectors in key overseas markets. Later, he was appointed to the Australian Human Rights Commission, serving as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and Race Discrimination Commissioner.

It was his landmark [2005 social justice report](#) which became the foundation for the Closing the Gap targets: the set-piece Indigenous advancement project of federal governments and the subject of an annual update to parliament.

Calma says his career in public service was inspired by his father, and is directly linked to the 1967 referendum on Indigenous rights.

"My father was very keen for me to get a job in the public service, a secure job, because it was only the '67 referendum that gave the opportunity to

be able to be considered in the sense of government policies. It was also an awareness raising for the population, to recognise that Aboriginal people had been for a long time denied a lot of opportunities.

“My three sisters and I all joined the public service as a result.”

Calma finished work in the public service in 2010, but acknowledges the move was only a “pseudo retirement”. With campus buzzing around us, and timing tight for the end of our lunch, it’s clear Calma is no normal retiree.

In 2014, he became the second Indigenous person appointed as chancellor of an Australian university, soon after he received an Order of Australia honour, recognition of years of advocacy for human rights and social justice, and distinguished service to the Indigenous community.

Tough fight

As our conversation flows, Calma takes opportunities to eat. He says it was 2019 when he was appointed as the co-chair of a senior advisory group for the Indigenous Voice to government, convened by then Indigenous Australians minister Ken Wyatt. In the years before, he had worked with both sides of politics on proposals for Indigenous recognition.

The appointment followed the Howard government’s Northern Territory intervention, and years of work by Calma and others on plans for a nationally representative Indigenous body to replace the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).

ATSIC opened its doors in 1990 but was abolished by the Howard government, [criticised over mismanagement and corruption allegations.](#)



"A government may or may not take notice, but then it's up to the parliament," Calma says of the Voice. **Jacky Ghossein**

"You look at ATSIC, and because they were established by legislation as a commission, they were able to be shut down. The National Congress, which we established as a company limited by guarantee, closed down because the government chose not to fund it. That's why there is a strong move to get us into the Constitution.

"That offers a protection, that the government of the day, if they have a control of parliament, which they did in those days, can't shut us down. There's some protection in there for Indigenous people."

But ahead of a referendum expected around October, Calma says securing the Voice to parliament will be a tough fight.

Some polls have shown the referendum's required double majority within reach, but long-term analysis shows the Yes side's lead has almost halved since August last year. A new Roy Morgan poll released last week showed support for the Voice fell to 46 per cent, with the No vote rising to 39 per cent. Some 15 per cent of respondents were undecided.

Calma says the design of the Voice, as a body advising both parliament

and government, is critical. Pointing to the NT intervention as an example, he says MPs will be able to push for scrutiny and achieve outcomes even where the government has a majority and is determined to take a particular course of action.

"A government may or may not take notice, but then it's up to the parliament if they think there's merit in the advice to then challenge the government of the day."

Calma welcomes the prime minister's strong support for the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and says many other MPs from across parliament are on board.

He praises former Liberal frontbencher [Julian Leeser's principled decision to quit the shadow ministry](#) to support the Voice, describing the Berowra MP as a key force behind development of the plan over recent years.



Calma is chancellor of the University of Canberra. *Andrew Meares*

Langton and Calma used their report to recommend that the Voice should advise on matters of "national significance" to Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people, relating to "their social, spiritual and economic wellbeing".

The report said engagement with the Voice should occur early in the development of relevant laws and policies, with parliament and the federal government obliged to seek advice on a defined and limited number of proposed areas that overwhelmingly affect Indigenous Australians.

A 24-member panel was recommended, with gender and geographic parity. Local and regional voice groups would provide input to the national body, and two advisory panels would be established on disability matters and youth.

In practice, debate on health, or education or housing for Indigenous communities would be directly informed by the views of the people the policy was being designed for.

Welcoming progress on local and regional voices under way at the state and territory level, Calma says the support of premiers and chief ministers will be significant in the months ahead.

He is disappointed in Opposition Leader Peter Dutton's opposition to the Voice.

"It wasn't a unilateral decision by Dutton. It was supported by others. He has called for the advice from the solicitor-general, but many of us would like to know what written advice he gave to his members," he says.

"I suspect other Liberals will follow Leeson and others in supporting the Voice. That will more and more marginalise the ultra-conservatives in the party."

Calma usually works late into the night, but when he gets a day off, there's a garden full of weeds waiting for his attention.

"I have big intentions on the weekends. It's a good outlet to get away from work and get a bit more thinking time."

We're out of time, and Calma is preparing to pose for photos en route to

his next meeting. With his signature broad smile, he tries to pay the bill, a breach of the rules for Lunch with the AFR.

"Next time," Calma insists as we say goodbye.

The bill

Cafe Mizzuna, The Hub, University of Canberra, Bruce, ACT

2 Chicken Caesar, \$40

Triple berry smoothie, \$8.80

Latte, \$4.90

Total: \$53.70