

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS MAYOR

Of Torres Strait Islander heritage, Thomas Mayor was born and raised on Larrakia land (the region we call Darwin and its surrounds). Through a mixture of influences, he was drawn to working on the wharves, where he spent 16 years as a labourer. He is currently the Deputy Secretary of the Northern Territory Branch of the Maritime Union of Australia and the Union's National Indigenous Officer.

In November 2022, on Anaiwan land (in the region of New England) I interviewed Thomas Mayor by telephone when he was on Wurundjeri Country (Melbourne). We spoke about the second edition of his book, *Finding the Heart of the Nation: The Journey of the Uluru Statement from the Heart Continues*.

The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

Tim Battin: Thomas, my first question goes to a general matter about the second edition of your book, *Finding the Heart of the Nation*. The book comes about at the same time as a change of federal government. Was there already a plan to publish a second edition or did a second edition come from the fact that there was a change of government?

Thomas Mayor: No, there wasn't a plan — well, actually, I started working on it just in case. So, the book had done so well, you know it's a bestseller, and obviously there's a lot of interest about it, so in the event that the Labor Party would win the election, or even in the off chance that the Coalition changed its position, we wanted to make sure that there was an updated resource for people to learn from and to answer simple questions. There is a new section in it with a simple-as-possible Q & A section that addresses some of the concerns — and misinformation. And so, we got that ready, and I did not write the conclusion, or complete the conclusion, until after the election, until we knew what the result was.

TB: I'm glad you brought up the topic of that section because I thought it was done particularly well. Was that something that you thought needed to be added in the second edition, given the reaction to the first edition?

TM: Yes, I thought what I have learned over the years is that it's really important to keep things as simple as possible. I think I could have written that section better, actually, but I'm working on another book at the moment with Kerry O'Brien, the former journalist, and it aims to be fewer than 100 pages — 96 pages — and it will aim to make things even simpler. And part of the way we will do that is to include cartoons and infographics and anything visual that can help people to see very clearly why the referendum must succeed.

TB: Yes. Let me ask you another question about that practical information section. You say this is to ensure that the reader "is both inspired and informed", which I rather liked. What do you see as the most important areas about which activists and fellow travellers should be informed?

TM: Well, I don't think it matters who we're talking about — whether it's activists or just the general public. We know we are beginning from a place where there is great goodwill in the Australian public and what people need is the confidence that this is the right thing. So, it's not so much the debate about whether there needs to be improvement to our country and how our relations are with Indigenous peoples or whether we should be recognised. It is down to whether this does really help Indigenous people, and I think that's what we try to cover in that section.

TB: My next question is more personal, if you like. Among First Nations people with whom you are most familiar, what was the reaction to Anthony Albanese's election-night pledge to commit to the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full?

TM: It was one of great excitement. It was something we have not only been fighting for, for five years; but beyond that for over a century we have struggled for recognition and for a statement or a petition to be responded to in such a way. The Uluru Statement is one of many statements and petitions, and pretty much all of them have been dismissed and ignored. The only one that I would say is a bit different is the Barunga Statement and Hawke was the Prime Minister then, and although that is still a sad story because the promise of treaty failed and the establishment of a Voice was eventually repealed by Howard in a very tactical way — softened up the Australian public, amplified its problems, before making that move.

TB: In your book you make the point that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not homogeneous and that we shouldn't expect them to be any more than we would expect non-Indigenous people to be homogeneous, politically or otherwise. I think you are right to make that point about there being risk of internal disagreements, and consequently white fellas pointing the finger about the disagreement, and what I am really asking you is how is that risk best handled?

TM: Well, we need to overwhelm the opposition to it, and that's across the political spectrum, we need to overwhelm that opposition and, as you mentioned, Indigenous people are no more homogenous than any other group. We are as political as any other human beings. We have Indigenous people who are members of the local Liberal Party, through to the Greens, and even on the extremes of both of those, so we must overwhelm them with the truth, and the truth is on our side in this — the logic — and logic and common sense are with us as well. And also by reaching people's emotions I think as well, what motivates people to want to do this great thing, which begins with a Voice. You know all of that is important because — I'll be straight — the people that oppose it are either misinformed or they have a political agenda that is contrary to the advancement of Indigenous people and in their own self-interest, and I'd say that's on the far left and the far right. I mean how can anyone in a democracy, firstly, deny that a greater Voice in decision making and representation is not a practical thing? How can anyone deny that Indigenous people do have a rightful place in this country and should be in the constitution, and have some power in the constitution and recognition? But there we are. And how can anybody believe that Indigenous people are going to disappear off the face of the earth if we have constitutional recognition? I mean I'm talking about the argument that Indigenous people are going to lose our sovereignty somehow from this. I think it's the most ridiculous thing that could possibly be said. This is like saying that the constitution in 1901 said there's no such thing as Indigenous people then we would've just given up. I get fired up about that.

TB: As I was thinking about my questions for this interview, I thought about non-Indigenous institutions in the Australian system which are — in one sense — a Voice to parliament. For example, the office of Auditor-General is accountable to the parliament but at the same time speaks with authority. It is a channel through which opinions can be conveyed to the parliament about what is proper. We don't think of such institutions as a third chamber. We don't think of them as detracting from democracy — indeed, we see them as enhancing democracy.

TM: There's the other argument about us wanting to insert 'race' into our constitution — that this is a racist thing. We're not a different race, we're humans and we are just seeking our rightful place and the ability to speak to our special interests in this country. Because there is inequality right now. The statistics prove there is not equality and if you believe there was equality then you have to believe that Indigenous people are a different race and that somehow are innately criminal or have some flaw in our DNA that causes us to die almost 10 years younger.

TB: In some ways you have already touched on this next question, but here's a chance to pull a few things together. What do the main disagreements about how to proceed boil down to among those groups wanting more than a Voice? What are the arguments and what are the counterarguments?

TM: You mean people who say that it's too weak?

TB: Yes. People who say that it's not enough.

TM: I would agree with that sentiment that we deserve more, but it comes down to — firstly — a collective decision that was taken at Uluru. And people who wanted more, and people who thought that we should aim lower, had to reach a compromise, and that's the way collectivism works. That was hard work. And nay-sayers claiming that we should have asked for more, especially those who were in the convention — and there's few of those — are not acting in a collective way, which weakens our position. Secondly, there's the reason why the decision was made: it is strategic. What people are saying — what I think what you are alluding to — is that people say that anything that is advisory to the parliament is weak. Well, anything that is more than advisory to the parliament is weaker but that is actually impossible. And there's a very good reason why the scare-mongering from the right has been that we're calling for a third Chamber to parliament, or a right to veto, because that is more than advisory, full-stop. That's what more than advisory is. It is just not possible, not going to happen, Australians are just not going to vote for that.

TB: A particularly persuasive point you make in the book is that constitutional recognition of Voice will prevent a future government from removing or defunding its formal channels as was done in the case of ATSIC by the Howard Government. Yet you are at pains to stress that Voice is a constitutional first step to be followed by other steps.

TM: Yes, absolutely, and the Voice will decide what those steps are. Our people, through a proper collective process, through representatives who we choose and can hold to account if they are not speaking genuinely on behalf of what the grassroots say, will decide our next priorities. I mean some of the next priorities are pretty obvious: addressing the issues of the justice system; addressing housing in our communities; how various programs are running our communities, where money is spent — all of these things are common issues across all of our communities, across the continent. And, you know, it's pretty easy to work out what we're going to be speaking about.

TB: Yes, indeed. Your approach can be characterised as one step at a time, in the best sense of the phrase. If we do succeed in establishing a Voice to parliament, how do you see further processes, such as treaty and truth, unfolding?

TM: I think much more effectively, by which I mean we will be able to reach outcomes sooner once the Voice is established. You see, truth telling alone does not change things. We do. It's our Voice, it's our political influence. It's our ability to affect laws and policies and to leverage our position where needed: that's what makes change. The truth is part of change. But the truth alone doesn't change anything. It is like how you think about a workplace. The truth of a workplace is that the workers provide the labour that produces the goods and the services, and, without workers, the employers have nothing. As powerful as that truth is, on its own it doesn't change things. It is our ability to organise the structure, the representation, and to use our Voice — our workers' Voice — to get the outcomes.

TB: The truth is a vehicle, in a way?

TM: Yes. It's a tool; it's leverage.

The last thing I would just like to add is a comment about the cost of failure. We must motivate people to put their shoulder to the wheel and work bloody hard to get a successful outcome in the referendum which will be held as soon as late 2023. Because the cost of failure of this new truth of this nation is that the Australian people have refused to acknowledge — officially refused by referendum — to acknowledge that Indigenous people were here and that we continue to be here and that we have a special place in this country. It's a denial of recognition, it's a denial of our sovereignty. Secondly, the new truth becomes that the Australian people again officially through referendum have decided that Indigenous people — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — should not be heard, should not be consulted, shouldn't have the decency of a Voice before decisions are made about us.