

## REASONS FOR SWAN BECOMING AN INDIGENOUS ALLY

There are some key reasons why SWAN should consider a role / an increased role as a supporter, or 'ally', of Indigenous people.

### REASON 1: INDIGENOUS PEOPLE HAVE ASKED US

'We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.' So ends the Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017, which was the result of an historic consensus, the National Convention of Indigenous People, and which identified three elements to bring about this better future. These are: Treaty, Truth-Telling and Voice. ('Voice' refers to the idea of a permanent institution for Indigenous people to express their views.) The Voice is proposed as a body outside of parliament, which must be heard yet leaving parliament the option to agree or disagree. It is not, as claimed by political opponents, a 'third chamber' of parliament. It is important, however, to recognise that amongst indigenous people there are various views about these three pillars, their relative priority and even whether constitutional recognition of First Nations people would threaten their sovereignty and self-rule. What is important, therefore, is supporting self-determination in the way we 'walk with' Indigenous people.

### REASON 2: TO RIGHT PAST WRONGS

When the Constitution was written a little over a century ago, two sets of parties negotiated to the exclusion of a third. The states and the Crown wrote their own rules for a Commonwealth without inviting the participation of the people who had for millennia owned the land – land that was, even then, and still is, being stolen. Often in violent fashion. (The Monthly, May, 2019).

*'Captain Cook had been instructed by the Crown in the discovery of land to "gain consent of the natives to take possession of convenient situations in the country in the name of the King of Great Britain" (King George III). No consent was ever asked for, or ever given. Aboriginal sovereignty has never been ceded. Racist assumptions, based on Social Darwinism, were that Aborigines were inferior to Europeans and would eventually die out. The denigration of Aboriginal people made it easier for the immigrants to take land, and Social Darwinism provided a neat explanation for the decline in Aboriginal numbers. When white people came to Australia, they took the lands of the first Australians and used it for their individual gains. Despite living here peaceably for over 65,000 years, new laws came into effect that took away the freedom of these Aboriginal Australians to care for their country of birth and inheritance, as well as to care for their families.*

*Those who survived the violence and sickness had their movements severely restricted and were not allowed to be seen on city streets after sundown. Those who were forced into missions had all aspects of their lives controlled by a white administrator. For example, an Aboriginal person had to apply for permission to take their sick child to the doctor, to get married and to visit family in other places. An Aboriginal person was not allowed to receive wages for work they had done and many administrators kept much of this money for themselves. They were slave labour. Children of mixed marriages were always on the run from the Welfare Officers and police to avoid being taken away from their Aboriginal mothers. Family members were not allowed to speak to their children in their own language*

so they were rendered dumb. Brothers and sisters were separated in institutions and again not allowed to speak to each other in their language. White Welfare Officers had the right to enter an Aboriginal person's home at any time to check that there was no dust on the shelves, the beds were made with 'hospital corners' and there was enough food in the house. If the family failed any of these tests, the Aboriginal children were removed. **These events happened only 40 – 50 years ago and there are many local people who vividly remember the fear of living through these times.** Ever since the white takeover of their nation states, the basic human rights of Aboriginal Australians have been ignored. Aboriginal Australians have struggled for over 200 years to get a fair deal for themselves and their people and, unfortunately, they continue to do so. (source: 'The Wadawurrung People, Did You Know?', Whitehead, J. June 2018, pp.11-18)

Sadly, past wrongs continue, recent examples including the deaths in Geraldton and Yendumu for which two police were charged with murder, and the Victorian deaths in custody of two Yorta Yorta women, one as recent as January 2020. National figures reflect an even broader perpetuation of wrongs.

### REASON 3: AS A WOMEN'S GROUP

Abductions of women, and children by white colonialists, were common. Members of today's Boon Wurrung /Bunurong community include descendants of women kidnapped from Point Nepean, Port Phillip by sealers who removed them to islands in Bass Strait for slave labour on sealing stations. These included the wife of a leader of the Yalukit Willam, one of a group of women abducted from the Nepean Peninsula. In 1836 Melbourne's new colonisers made attempts to rescue these women but were unsuccessful. Another witness was a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman who accompanied Chief Protector George Robinson to Melbourne in 1839. She confirmed to Robinson that she had been used as a decoy to entice the Boon Wurrung women into the hands of sealers. (Source: "Yalukit Willam, The River People of Port Phillip", by Meyer Eidelson, printed by the City of Port Phillip, 2014. P.19).

Abductions of women continued. The *Bringing Them Home* report details countless examples like the following:

*I was at the post office with my Mum and Auntie (and cousin). They put us in the police ute and said they were taking us to Broome. They put the mums in there as well. But when we'd gone about ten miles they stopped and threw the mothers out of the car. We jumped on our mothers' back, crying, trying not to be left behind. But the policemen pulled us off and threw us back in the car. They pushed the mothers away and drove off, while our mothers were chasing the car, running and crying after us. We were screaming in the back of that car. When we got to Broome, they put me and my cousin in the Broome lock-up for two days waiting for the boat to Perth.* (Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, 1997 p.5)

The report points out that girls and women were particularly targeted for removal in the aim of controlling the reproduction of Indigenous people. Alarming, during the 1950s and 1960s even greater numbers of Indigenous children were removed from their families to advance the cause of assimilation. (Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, 1997)

The abduction of Aboriginal women had devastating effects on the wellbeing of many Bunurong / Boon Wurrung families. Forced removals of children continues to this day. And as the pleas today of the 'Grandmothers Against Removals' Indigenous women show us, the removal of children by the state constitutes contemporary generation stealing. <https://www.facebook.com/GMAR.GrandmothersAgainstRemovals/>

We also know that Indigenous women suffer higher rates of violence. Australia has been told on four separate occasions by the United Nations, that it needed to address violence against indigenous women. (Koori Mail, Feb. 12, 2020, P. 5).

#### REASON 4: WE ARE A SOCIAL JUSTICE GROUP

Firstly, as a justice group, it should concern us that Australia is the only Commonwealth country not to have a Treaty with its First Nations people. Australia is actually in breach of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People by not according them a representative voice. Secondly, it is clearly unjust that on so many measures, Indigenous people experience significant disadvantage compared to non-Indigenous Australians, for example on employment, economic, health, and justice measures. To date, only two of the Closing the Gap targets have been met. Thirdly, Aboriginal people experience very high levels of racism with at least 97% having been targets of verbal or physical distress and trauma and shamefully Aboriginal youth suicide is the highest in the world.

#### REASON 5: TO ADD OUR VOICE

Becoming an ally represents a chance for SWAN to join the many non-Indigenous Australians who support Indigenous Australians right, including community groups, friends, neighbours, schools, church groups, environment groups, local councils, businesses, the arts, and sports bodies.

For example, The Mount Eliza Village Uniting Church, The Church of Christ and the Mornington Interchurch group are all actively engaged in supporting Indigenous issues. The Mount Eliza Uniting Church is, for instance, supporting the Bunurong Land Council as the Land Council engages in a Treaty process at the Victorian Indigenous Assembly. (The Victorian Government has, unlike the Federal Government, supported Treaty processes with Indigenous people.) Another group, Peninsula Allies Decolonising, has just been established.

Labor Opposition Leader, Anthony Albanese has stressed that an Indigenous voice to parliament, enshrined in the Australian Constitution would be a crucial step on the road to reconciliation, Voice, Treaty and Truth-telling. (Koori Mail, 12 Feb, 2020, P.3).

Perhaps surprisingly, support also comes from Mining Giant BHP: *"When BHP chief executive Andrew Mackenzie was preparing to announce in January that the mining giant would back the Uluru drive, and tip \$1 million into a national education campaign, the Opposition leader sent him a congratulatory text message, noting it was an important indicator of the public mood. 2015."* (The Monthly, May 2019: P 40). Rio Tinto by contrast, destroys ancient sacred sites.

#### REASON 6: WE ARE ON THE LAND OF LOCAL INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Colonialists treated the land we now live on as if it were vacant, hence the term 'Terra Nullius'. Historical records of Indigenous peoples' occupation refer to many parts of the area we

currently term the Mornington Peninsula including Mount Eliza, (Berringwallin), Mount Martha (Nerngallin), Arthurs Seat (Wongho,) Point Nepean (Manmore), Cape Schank (Tuornangho), Sandy Point (Yollodunnha), and the Western Port plains, including Coolart which was reportedly the site chosen by the Bunurong, when forced by the colonial government to identify one site. Assistant 'Protectorate' William Thomas also refers to Merricks, Balnarring, Tubberburra, and Tuerong as sites where Indigenous people gathered. The historical records of the white invaders provide considerable detail about what happened to Indigenous people in the city of Port Phillip, and on the Mornington Peninsula to the Bunurong /Boon Wurrung people. Hearing the names of the places where we live brings it home; fundamentally, we are all on Aboriginal land.

William Thomas, the government's own official, unsuccessfully petitioned the Governor four times for measures to save the Kulin including Aboriginal self-management, compensation, law reform, limits to development and land tenure for the Boon Wurrung.

Reverend Joseph Orton described the disaster unfolding in front of him in 1839:

*The Government is fast disposing of their lands ... and no reserve whatever of land is made for the provision of the natives, neither in securing to them sufficient portions of their own native land as a hunting ground or otherwise providing for their necessities. The result is that the natives who remain in the neighbourhood of the settled districts become pilfering-starving-obtrusive mendicants, and after suffering incalculable deprivations, abuses and miseries will gradually pine – die away – and become extinct, leaving only an eternal memento of a blot upon the justice, equity and benevolence of our Christian government.* (Source: "Yalukit Willam, The River People of Port Phillip", by Meyer Eidelson, printed by the City of Port Phillip, 2014. P.53)

The birth rate dropped dramatically as Indigenous people saw no future in having children without a country to inherit. William Thomas recorded that by 1857 the numbers of Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung had fallen from an estimated 350 people to 28 persons with only eleven Boon Wurrung remaining.

Living currently on the Peninsula are the descendants of these original owners of the land, the Bunurong and Boon Wurrung people as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who have moved / been moved into the area. Aboriginal organisations on the Mornington Peninsula include The Bunurong Land Council, The Boon Wurrung Land and Sea Foundation, Willum Warrain Aboriginal Association (Hastings), Nairn Marr Djambana Association (Frankston), Baluk Arts, and Living Culture. There are also Koorie Engagement Education Support Officers active in schools on the Peninsula and a Victorian Aboriginal Child Care branch at Frankston as well as an Aboriginal liaison team at Frankston Hospital. There are 1304 Indigenous people living on the Peninsula, mostly in Hastings (45% are under 18).

Finally, coming back to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Pat Turner, has recently spoken out about the government's undermining of the request for a voice. Ms Turner warned that Australia is lagging behind all liberal democracies which have Indigenous minorities when it comes to setting up institutions and structures that allow Indigenous people to be heard. (The Guardian, 30/9/20).

Let us, as members of a social justice group, work to redress the shameful injustice suffered by Indigenous women and Indigenous people in general.

**Prepared by Maureen Donnelly & Val Campbell, March 2020**